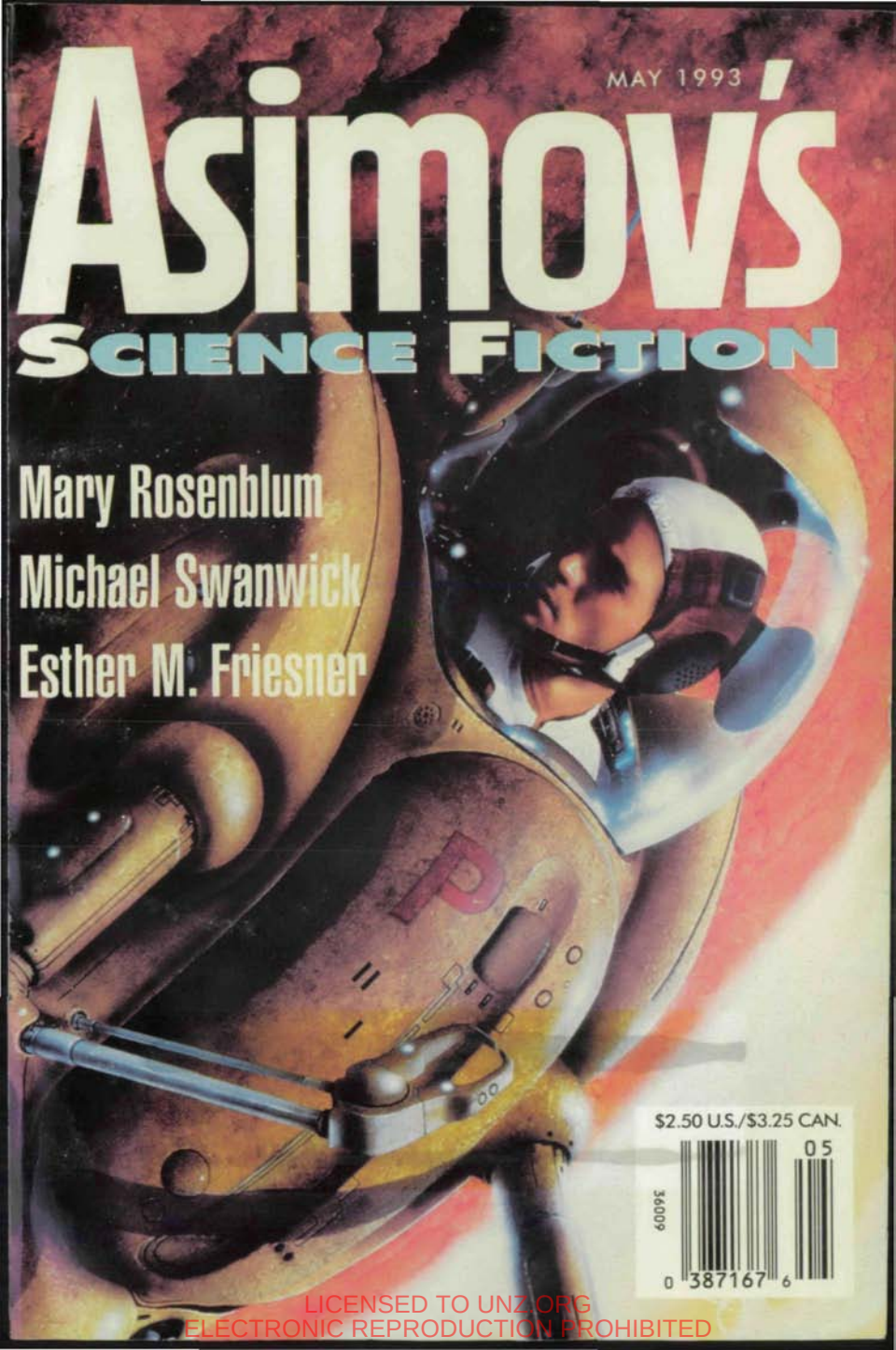

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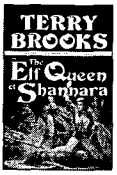

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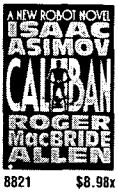

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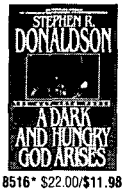

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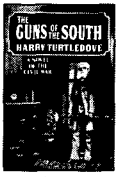

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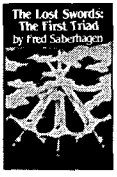

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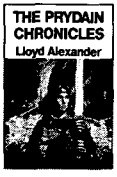

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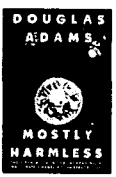

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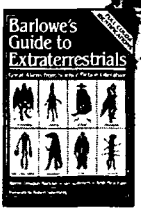

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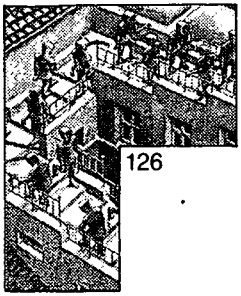
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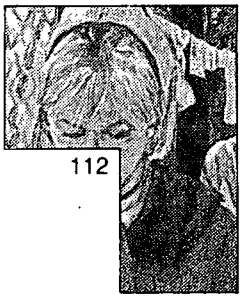
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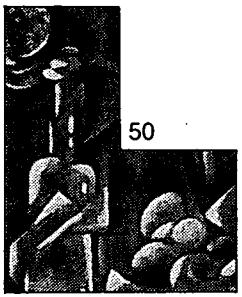
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Stories from *Asimov's* have won nineteen Hugos and nineteen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eight Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1992 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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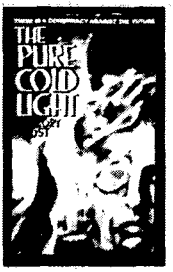

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LETTERS

Dear Editor

Don't let Connie Willis write any more editorials! My well ordered life is in chaos.

I have three library cards, in three cities, and have only succeeded in finding three of the stories she recommended. Two of them I found by scouring all the anthologies I came across. In the meantime I've reread "Who Goes There?" and immediately recognized that the movie "The Thing," which I didn't even see, was based on it. Now I'm looking for a copy of Bradbury's "Veldt" for some research that Connie's editorial and "The Anything Box" inspired. Still haven't found "The Last Step."

Summer sewing projects go unfinished while I discover "Nightfall" and rediscover "The Little Black Bag." I wonder if that's why I became a nurse?

The forms I was developing for my school health office lie buried in the bowels of my computer while I nod over "The Roads Must Roll" and "Mars is Heaven," more adolescent favorites.

I'm certainly glad she didn't mention Anne McCaffrey in the list of women writers or I would feel compelled to go back and start reading her early stuff, too.

School starts in three days and I haven't even finished my October issue of *Asimov's*. November leers at me from my reading table.

Connie, Connie, you naughty girl!

THANKS!

Trina Williams
17804 Santa Gertrudes Circle
Fountain Valley, CA 92708

Dear *Asimov's*,

This summer has been an introduction to your magazine for me, thanks to a woman who works as a potter in my family's ceramics business here in Anchorage. Reading *Asimov's* is an avocation for me now, proving interesting as a whole. Sometimes the stories are difficult to wade through, sometimes they "make my day." Mostly, my daily exposure to reading *Asimov's* has hearkened me back to my literature roots. I feel my grasp of grammer and sentence structure returning. I may not like some of the stories, but reading what I do like has affected and enhanced my writing skills.

I especially want to praise Pamela Sargent's wonderful satire, "Danny Goes To Mars," that was in your October 1992 issue. My family and I are very dismayed, politically, about both dominant parties. We talk about our disillusionment a lot over our meals together. What a delight it was to happen

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upon Ms. Sargent's story. Once I read it, I couldn't wait to share the story with friends and family. All are roaring with laughter over the thought of Dan Quayle on Mars. Thanks for including Ms. Sargent's story.

I look forward to my friend, the potter, coming to me monthly with her already-read copy of *Asimov's*. Thanks for existing.

Most Sincerely,

Penny Stevens
Anchorage, AK

ANNOUNCEMENT

The 1992 Rhysling Award for Best Short Poem went to "Song of the Martian Cricket" by David Lunde *(Asimov's,* December 1991). The Rhyslings are bestowed by the Science Fiction Poetry Association on the year's best speculative, SF, or fantasy poetry.

Dear Mr. Dozois,

Connie Willis's article "The Women SF Doesn't See," in the October '92 issue, discusses several women SF writers of the fifties. The existence of these writers, Willis argues, refutes the proposition that "there were no women in SF before the seventies." The proposition *is* clearly wrong as it stands but, as Willis plainly states, she gleans her counter-examples from her own experience and from best of the year anthologies. We decided to look at the raw data—the contents pages of '50s SF magazines. Willis also says "[it is believed by some that] a group of feminist writers led by Joanna Russ and Ursula Le Guin stormed the barri-

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cades . . . It never occurred to me that SF was a man's field that had to be broken into. How could it be with all those women writers?" We decided to extend our search, to see if the barricades—with respect to the magazines—were indeed brought down.

The table that follows shows the percentage of a magazine's contributors that were women. Four decades are covered: we took a year at random from each decade for each magazine. Those gender-neutral names which we could not identify were eliminated from the list (these were fairly rare). We are reasonably aware of the more common pseudonyms which women writers used and could therefore identify them as women. See chart below for the results.

The writers that Willis cites represent nearly half of all the women who had stories printed in the sample we took from the '50s. The '60s saw no increase in stories published by women and the '70s saw some improvement when *Asimov's* began publication in 1977. The record shows that, in all other magazines, there was no significant increase and in fact the picture overall was a little better in the '50s. We're delighted that Willis found enough female writers to inspire her, but these figures are hardly inspiring.

According to Willis, most SF readers have the impression that the '60s and '70s brought many more women into the field. The figures suggest that they're wrong, badly wrong. But why do they believe it? Perhaps these readers, believing that the SF field is open to change, could not imagine how feminism could *not* have resulted in a subsequent invasion of women writers. Or perhaps Russ and Le Guin's feminist fictions, because their feminism was new to many readers, bulk larger in the memory than, for example, Zenna Henderson's schoolmistress stories.

Things are changing in the nineties. Assuming the gender breakdown of stories published accurately represents the proportions of stories being submitted, it would seem that the barricades are at last bending a little in the storm. Women are maintaining their market share in *Asimov's*, and in

	'50s	'60s	'70s	'80s
Asimov's	n/a	n/a	25%	23%
F&SF	17%	6.9%	7.2%	16%
Astounding/ Analog	2.8%	5.6%	3.9%	5%
Galaxy	9.8%	4.9%	10%	n/a
New Worlds	1.5%	1.4%	n/a	n/a

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F&SF and *Analog* they have made remarkable gains (up to 34 percent and 18 percent respectively). The visual media's success in popularizing SF may be partly responsible for arousing women's interest. But something must have given these new recruits the courage to turn their interest into submissions, and to ignore the low female representation. For that, it is feminism—not the handful of women writers that one can draw from any decade—that can probably take the credit.

Sincerely,

Mike Christie
Sherry Coldsmith

Dear Gardner,

Just to keep the record straight, two of C.L. Moore's best stories are not " 'Of Woman Born' and 'Vintage Season,' which was published under the name of Larry O'Donnell," as Connie Willis has it in the October issue, but "No Woman Born" and "Vintage Season," which was published under the name Lawrence O'Donnell. Otherwise, What Connie Said.

Love,

Damon Knight
Eugene, OR

Dear *Asimov's*,

I just finished reading the six books of the Foundation series, which I found to be incredible—so much so that I had to buy all of the books from the robot series and the Galactic series to continue to read about the Foundation universe. When I saw "Cleon the Emperor" in this magazine I was very excited—especially after I read it. I am left wondering, though, what will happen after this novella. I am told that this story is from the seventh Foundation novel, and that book has yet to be published. Did Isaac Asimov finish this novel before he died? If so, will the rest of the novel be printed in this magazine or will the entire novel be published? Please tell me what is to become of this last Foundation book. Thank you.

Kenneth Sillayze
Ridgewood, NY

Isaac Asimov finished his last Foundation novel, Forward the Foundation, *shortly before he died. We published "The Consort," a novella that makes up part of that book, in our last issue. The hardcover edition of the entire novel is now available from Doubleday.*

—Sheila Williams

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SOLO

Caught in the wind's reversal my hair
vexes my eyes: the last man on Earth, blinded by
his own dirty hair. I spin out of the wind
into the shelter of an alcove—the shard-scattered
empty windows of Macy's. Nothing left here
to eat, but there are other things. I have no pressing engagements.

I pick my way through the scattered
upheaval of the sexless mannequins,
expensive clothes torn off for spite or shelter,
past the perfumery still reeking three years
after the vandals came and died. Up dead escalators
to the music floor. I find a guitar and strings;
tune it and strum: dominant, relative minor,
subdominant. Seeds of Requiem
Mass in B-flat, but only seeds. Memories are
all I have, and the memories are going.

As my mind is going. I fumble through this
requiem for all my race. Blinded now by water, in my mind
I scramble up the mountains to the stars;
I stumble down the mountains to ancient pits
cluttered with the bones of dinosaurs
under bones of mammoths under bones of men, under tar,
under ash. Dry my eyes and see Macy's, gutted
in those last days. I was on a mountain, in Vermont,
the day someone did something . . . it doesn't matter what thing
anymore. Someone fights back, and the sky is
filled with bleeding stars. The night flings
fast death to Earth; death is intercepted in the air,
and slow death filters down. For some reason,
or no reason, I alone was immune.

It's warm in here. It would be fine
to play Bach here till I fade. But God keeps
sending me rats, slow and fat. I am reverent, and dine.

—Joe Haldeman

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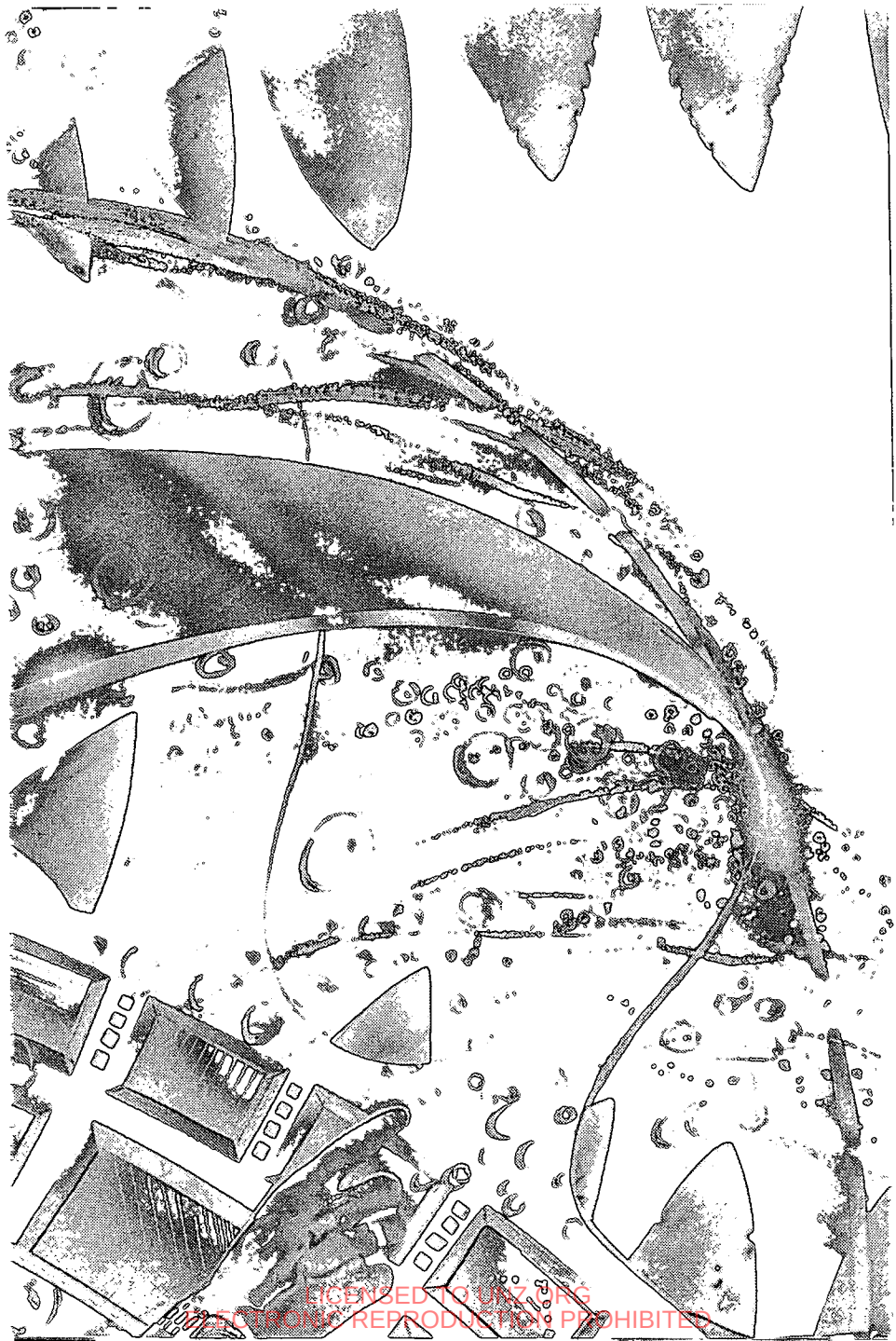

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Robert Reed

BLIND

An explorer and a scientist embark on a dark and terrifying adventure along the sea floor in Robert Reed's suspenseful new tale. Mr. Reed is currently working on a novel.

art: Broeck Steadman

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Jeffson uses white chalk for the seafloor, drawing lava pillows and hot springs with a steep drop on one side. He's talking about the seamount, explaining how it's the only one in the area and it's got just the one vent community, which is ideal. "Ideal for what?" I ask; and he says, "I'm getting to that, just a minute." He changes to pink chalk, drawing tube worms and the various crabs and clams and fishes, and he gives a brief history of the place. When he found it; when he did his population studies; when he realized that something was stealing calories. Which means what? I'm wondering. Except I don't ask, already having learned my lesson. Then Jeffson picks up a stick of blue chalk and says, "This is us, Morgan." He draws a blue submersible with two stick figures inside it, and someone makes a joke. My, my. Doesn't Mary look thin? People giggle, and Jeffson gives us a warning glare, very brief and sharp. Then he puts his chalk down and wipes his hands on his trousers, dirtying them in several shades. He finds a hunk of yellow chalk, and he stands with his back to us, asking the blackboard, "Are you trustworthy?"

Half a dozen of us are sitting in his lab. Dr. Harold Jeffson is a heavy hitter in ocean research, a reigning expert in deepwater vents. I know him by reputation. He's got the kind of pull it takes to win major grants. He's after me and my team, plus Big-Eye, although so far he hasn't told us why.

The yellow chalk is passed between hands, and he turns to face us, telling me, "I need assurances. I can't risk having my competitors hear a word of this."

Jeffson is a big man, never married, pear-shaped and sloppy with big eyes in a perpetual glaze. My father warned me about his type—obsessed and humorless. My father was his type, but the difference is that I liked Dad.

"I don't trust people, as a whole," he confesses.

"You can trust us," I promise. "That's a given."

But doubts seem to float in front of his face.

So I say, "Listen. We've worked for three navies and the CIA, and that's all you'll hear about those jobs. Secrecy we understand. We may sound young, but we're professionals."

Jeffson gives a little nod, nothing more.

Then my chief designer asks, "What did you mean, something's stealing calories? You're talking about eating, aren't you?"

Jeffson gives a little blink, then nods. Using his empty hand, he smudges crabs and clams and tube worms, as if they're being removed from the place. "Judging by my data," he spouts, "and including calorie

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counts and the patterns of apparent feeding . . . and assuming a modest metabolism . . . I'm predicting a single organism, and big. . . !"

Nobody speaks, nobody moves.

"Sperm whales can dive this deep, but they don't eat sulfide-tainted organisms. And sharks, believe me, wouldn't be as neat and indiscriminate as whatever this is—"

"Oh, I get it!" shouts my chief mechanic. "You're talking about some sort of sea serpent, aren't you?"

Jeffson snarls. "I don't like that name. Don't use it." Then he draws with the yellow chalk, telling us, "I prefer *hypothetical benthic predator*." He makes an oblong body complete with flippers and a tail, then a long muscular neck. "Of course this is a guess. I'm just assuming some kind of taxonomic relationship with certain extinct organisms—"

"A plesiosaur!" someone gasps. Me, I realize.

Jeffson gives the thing a head, long jaws with curling long teeth and big eyes peering down at the blue submersible. "Sailors have reported creatures of this sort for centuries. Loch Ness has its similar denizen. Is it real? Nobody knows. But I want to be the first person to know, and I will be, provided we can work together."

My designer leans close and says, "A sea serpent hunt, Mary. Can you believe it?"

Not really, no.

"Tell *no one*," Jeffson warns us. The CIA doesn't use that kind of black tone, and I don't like him. It's not his obsessiveness, but it's the abrasiveness. It's his apparent lack of manners. It's personal taste and myriad gray details, and none of them mean squat. We need the work. So long as he's not a serial killer, I'm thinking, I can deal with him.

"We'll go down and wait," he's telling us. "There's no other vent in the region, no other source of easy food. We'll be patient. Observant. Eventually it'll come to us."

I stare at the yellow eyes and those scimitarlike teeth.

"How long can we stay below?"

Someone nudges me.

I jump, and Jeffson asks, "Your submersible's called what?"

"Big-Eye."

"How clever." His voice is flat, thoroughly unimpressed. "A crew of two . . . how long can it stay down?"

"Ten or eleven days. Maybe twelve."

"That should be ample." He sets the yellow chalk into the tray, then picks up his blue chalk and adds a layer to Big-Eye's hull. "I've got ideas for enticements, Morgan. I hope you're flexible, if you know what I mean."

I don't, no. But then again, I'm barely paying attention to him. I'm

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looking at those blue stick figures inside that blue bottle, and maybe it's my imagination, but they seem to have little fists on the ends of their stick arms. They've probably been locked up together for too long. Tensions are thick. The hypothetical benthic critter hovers over them, ready to pounce; but they're too busy to notice, I realize, clawing at each other's eyes. . . .

2

Big-Eye has two claims to fame.

First is its power plant—a Russian reactor meant for deep space and purchased wholesale—and that's what gives it its punch and endurance. The internal atmosphere is scrubbed clean; moisture is recirculated; two people can stay down for as long as their food and patience can last. The cabin itself is minuscule, two padded seats with the toilet inside a coffin-sized closet, the galley right next door. Yum-yum. But hey, it's worlds better than the old submersibles, all battery-powered and creeping along like invalids.

The second wonder is its visualization system. BLIND. It means *B*enthic *L*ight *IN*tensification *D*evice, and my chief designer is its proud papa. He built the prototypes in his garage, and I'm the one who brought the money and the clever name. "Want to see the abyss? Use BLIND!" We sell our tricks around the world, though Big-Eye, without the slenderest slightest whiff of a doubt, is the best deep-diving machine that I've ever known.

But an ugly child, it is. Its front end is a glass-hulled cabin, black as an eight-ball and just as round. The rest of it is the reactor and engines, mechanical arms and ballast. Sensors are buried in the fancy glass, absorbing photons, registering frequency and direction. On board computers use that data to build coherent, mostly accurate images. Pilot and passenger view the world through special goggles. Look right, and we think we're peering through window glass. Look left, and the computers shift accordingly. Instantly. Slick as a baby otter.

The ocean's abyss only looks blacker than night.

There's a wealth of bioluminescence, static discharges and tiny chemical reactions that, when repeated often enough, become a faint, useful glowing fog.

Like now.

Tube worms stand beneath us like mutant grasses, redder than blood and thick as legs. The crabs and odd fishes are white as chalk, and the clams are too damned big to be real. I've been here before, I'm thinking. Not *here*, but at the other vent communities on other seafloors. These

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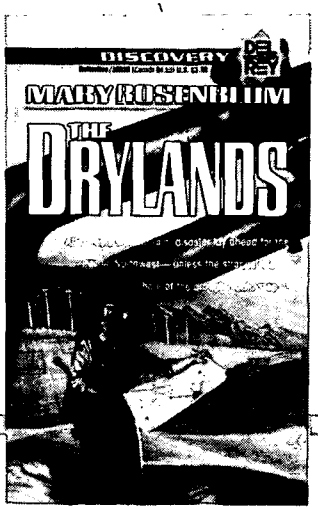

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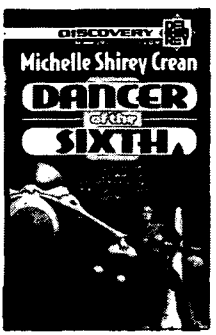

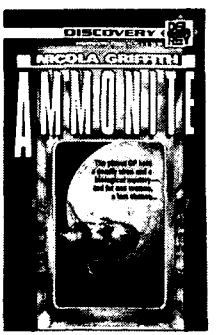

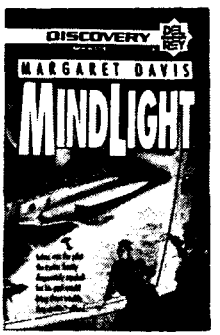

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places are richer than tidal pools, if memory serves. More productive in terms of calories per square furlong, and so on. They're fed by the bacteria growing in the porous rock, and the bacteria feed on an assortment of bizarre chemical reactions. The hot springs slough off the excess and the careless, and the result is a living haze drifting before us, feeding every glorious thing. Directly, or not.

Jeffson is impressed. I can't see him, what with my goggles, but I hear it in his voice.

"All right," is what he says. "Not perfect, but it should do."

For him, that's impressed. I ask, "Where do we go?"

He shifts his weight, his butt squeaking against the padded seat. "Up to those rocks, Morgan. Just like I told you last night."

"Sorry," I mutter. "Just making sure."

My team has this betting pool. How Many Days Before Mary Hits Jeffson? I'm down for *Never*, which is the only way they'd let me bet. Of course. And a clubbing counts the same as a fist fight, gunshots and explosives being considered showboating and taboo for purposes of this contest.

"We'll put the bait here," Jeffson tells me. "No, back. Back over here—!"

"I can't see you pointing."

"Here, here, here! Stop this thing, will you?!"

We're going to add a little inducement for our hypothetical. Using shadowy Japanese connections, Jeffson's managed to get a hold of some big minke whale steaks—something that makes me uneasy—and we're carrying them in freezers strapped under the glass cabin. He says, "Here!" and I kill our momentum, then activate one of the mechanical arms and crack open one freezer. A table-sized chunk of frozen black-red meat hits the raw lava; and of course Jeffson says, "Not there. Up on that high spot!"

Whales die, he's reasoning. Die and sink and offer any hypotheticals an easy feast. He hopes our hypothetical will smell the dead minke and go nuts. Caution to the wind, and so on.

"Now what?" I ask my invisible partner.

"Up on the ridge, as planned." It's never just the words, but it's the way they're said, every sentence with a superior tone. A barely restrained frustration. "Just like we decided last night."

I breathe, I relax. Piloting by feel, my engines give a solid, tireless throb, every system nominal. My goggles feed me important data. Four years of diving, and Big-Eye's like part of my body.

"That crevice . . . on our right. . . !"

It's a deep crevice, and the work is delicate. The glass hull can take plenty of abuse, but scratches are bad news. They mess up BLIND, which

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means I've got to be careful. This is like setting a Ming vase into a box of rocks and brick shards. Only the stakes are worth more.

"Drop deeper," he says. "We're too exposed."

Rock grinds against our engine housings, then comes silence.

And he says, "Lower still."

I give the engines a burst, and we inch forward, then drop; and he says, "I guess it's good enough."

Everything is below us. Tube worms and whale meat, plus a general strangeness. But it reminds me of something else, some other place that I haven't brought to mind in years.

I whisper, "Ducks."

Jeffson says, "Where?"

Then he realizes what I said, and he says, "Please be quiet, please!" Which I am. I'm sitting on the bottom of the ocean, thinking about ducks, and thinking about my father too.

Honest.

3

Dad made his money in a time-honored fashion, through insider trading. In one year, our family went from comfortably wealthy to kick-ass rich. I was a kid, and suddenly I was Mary, middle daughter to Raymond Morgan—Wall Street wizard and general savant. It was some transition. And say what you will about cheaters; but Dad was pretty much the ideal dad. No mistresses. No boozing. Intense, sure, but never ignoring his family. And he sure as hell never let me get too proud of his money. No small accomplishment, that.

I was as close to a son as he got. I played sports, went camping, and could curse enough to blister paint. He came to me one day—I was thirteen or so—and he said, "Let's go hunting this fall. What do you think?"

"I'd rather not," I reported.

"But you'll enjoy hunting. You'll see."

I thought for a moment, then countered with, "I don't know how to shoot."

"So you'll learn!"

He hired some skeet shooting master, paying a fortune for a few hours of lessons; then he rented an elaborate blind and an entire lake set near some wildlife refuge. I kept telling him it was a waste, that I didn't want to kill birds. Not unless they were trying to kill me, at least. But no, we had to go. Dad had paid through the season, and he'd made up his mind, and there wasn't any choice. So there we were on opening day, standing

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in a sunken blind for the entire Saturday, rain changing to sleet and then snow, then back to rain again. Dad screwed up in the first ten minutes, shooting a hen mallard and limiting out. From then on it was just me hunting, about ten million decoys in front of us and Dad calling in the flocks with his fancy quacking toys. That lake must have looked like paradise to the ducks. The poor things were practically wrestling each other for the privilege of landing in front of us.

Boom-boom!

Boom-boom-boom!

I spent the whole day punching holes in the damned clouds, not one duck feather ruffled. I kept saying, "I don't want to be here," and Dad kept telling me, "Lead them. Aim. Fire!" Not a single iron pellet hit flesh; and afterward, in a fit of anger, he took me back to my teacher, trying to demand a refund.

The two men tested me. Fifty clay pigeons, and I hit forty-eight of them. Boom-boom-boom-boom. I even hit the ones that they heaved up in parabolic arcs. And that's when Dad understood, at last. I'll always remember the moment. He kind of looked at me and then looked away, saying to the wind, "All right. Okay. You don't really like hunting. Fine. I can appreciate that."

4

Hunting hypotheticals is a little like hunting ducks, only it's bigger and stranger, and a lot more comfortable too. Our minke steak has defrosted in the warmish water, a couple of blind crabs have scuttled over and begun to chew. We nap in shifts, someone always watching. We eat cold food and drink stale water, and when we talk we talk in whispers, Jeffson not wanting to spook our quarry. Who knows how well it hears?

He asks about Big-Eye. Why'd I build it, and how?

I'd have preferred to build a spaceship, I admit. The ocean is a poor woman's adventure. I tell him about Dad leaving his daughters some money—Mom and the charities got most of it—and my sisters using theirs to build houses and lure in husbands. But my share went into finding talent and being the bankroll. We had a robot prototype named Little-Eye, and it sank and died. It's amazing how fast you can eat up millions, I tell him. Particularly when you're having fun.

"Innovation is hard work," Jeffson informs me. "Thankless and hard, and does the public appreciate it?"

We're talking about me, aren't we? I go on with my story, Big-Eye following Little-Eye and our operation moving into the black, sort of. I can pay my people. I'm not in debt. The work is interesting, and of course

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there's money coming from the BLIND technology. We sell it, and I take my share. More and more people are working in the deep ocean, and so yes, I'm saying, the public does appreciate—

"It's harder in science," says Jeffson, interrupting me. "A lot tougher than real life, believe me."

I say nothing.

"What scientists matter?" He breathes for effect, then says, "Darwin. Einstein. Hawking. The first and the fastest. They're the ones everyone knows, and being second place means nothing."

"Okay," I say.

And he says, "It's all tooth and claw, tooth and claw. You don't have a clue, being in the real world like you are."

So I tell him, "I've worked with other scientists. They didn't sound like football coaches—"

"They weren't good scientists," says Jeffson.

I say nothing.

"It's guts and luck," he tells me. "You go somewhere new, think some new thought, and if you're right you get the Nobel or a PBS show. They're about the same status these days."

"And you're a good scientist?" I say, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"Sure," he says. Talk about balls.

"And what if you're wrong?" I wonder aloud.

"Then my colleagues spin jokes about me at the various professional conferences." His voice tells more than just those words, anger and old injury mixed into them. "Stupid people love nothing more than to see you knocked down." He gives a little growl, then tells me once again, "You've got it lucky, Morgan. Don't doubt it for a second. . . !"

5

I nap for a while, wake and find nothing changed.

Except I have to pee. I rise and pull my goggles off, the cabin half-bright with glowing control panels. I crawl to the back and into the minuscule bathroom. The solitude is refreshing. A relief. I stay until I'm claustrophobic, then I return and find Jeffson standing, pivoting his head, his goggles still in place and something outside worth his attention.

"Anything?" I ask.

He says, "Maybe."

I pull the straps over my head, and he says, "Maybe not." I can't see anything new. He mutters something about a vague glow and motions. Barely one day into this, and already he's seeing things. I sit again, always watching. More crabs are working on the minke steak; tube

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worms wiggle as if a breeze were blowing; little white fishes come over to us, staring into the black glass with their stupid black eyes.

"This is how it all looked," says Jeffson. "This is the way it was back in the Cretaceous."

"Pardon?"

"There was an enormous volcanic upwelling, right here in the Pacific. Molten rock flooded up from the deep mantle. There were huge endless eruptions and huge amounts of carbon dioxide released. The plume under Hawaii? That's just a leftover. It's the smoke coming out after the bullet's been fired."

"Yeah?"

"Vents like this one had to be common. One hundred million years ago, and the ocean floors were littered with them." He moves in his seat, then says, "You're a plesiosaur, Morgan. Imagine it. You breathe air and swim on the surface, but under you is a jungle. A rich and reliable jungle."

"Okay."

"Sperm whales can dive a couple miles deep. Why not you?"

"Why not?"

"You come here, and your children after you. There's a strong selection pressure that rewards the plesiosaurs who can stay longest and eat the most."

"Improvements to the prototype," I offer.

And he's almost amiable, saying, "Exactly. Right." He gives a little laugh, then says, "You're reptilian, which means you don't have a whale's metabolism. Which is nice. Maybe your descendants evolve some kind of gill. Softshell turtles absorb oxygen through the folds in their anuses. Maybe you've done something similar, do you suppose?"

I imagine myself swimming around the seamount, some kind of elaborate anus trailing behind me.

And he keeps laughing, maybe entertained by the same image.

Then I ask, "Aren't these vents older than the Cretaceous?"

"We've found tube worm fossils from the Cambrian, yes. And these autotrophic bacteria may have been the first lifeforms on Earth. Suppose there's a new upwelling every hundred million years. Suppose there are periods where this kind of community covers millions of square miles of seafloor. And between those times there are these relics, little pockets waiting for the next golden age."

I'm surprised. This is a rather nice moment, really.

"These communities have survived asteroid impacts," he tells me, "and they'd never even notice us having a nuclear war."

"Probably not," I allow.

And he laughs again, saying, "For all we know, if you looked up 'Earth'

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in the galactic encyclopedia, this is the place they'd show you." He giggles like a little kid. "This is our oldest, most representative scene. Right here. Right now."

And I'm thinking how it's odd. Talk about big things—millions of years and the galaxy—and the man becomes bearable, halfway at ease and glancingly *nice*. It's as if you have to dilute him down with the universe before you can appreciate him. Or something like that.

6

Our hypothetical arrives without quite arriving, hovering where we can just see it, and I find that disquieting. Can it see us? But how can it? We've got the best vision possible, and it's still nothing more than a smudge, pale and soft, some mild brand of luminescence responsible. I get the distinct impression that it's studying us, but who knows? My job is to initiate the RECORD function in our computers, making Big-Eye remember everything it sees, and to nudge Jeffson, waking him. Which I do. And I tell him, "There's something. It's near the edge of the seamount—"

"That's it," he snaps.

I think I see flippers and a long neck, then I can't. I can't tell what I'm seeing. Minutes pass. Jeffson wants it to come for the minke, giving us a perfect view; but nothing happens. I guess if you've got a reptile's metabolism and a hundred million year history, then patience is easy. It's the first thing you put on your resumé, you're so good at being patient.

"I think it sees us," I offer.

And he says, "It can't." Then he breathes and says with a soft, excited voice, "Let's trying chasing it, now."

I find my controls by touch. It takes a few seconds to bring the engines back on line, then I have to muscle us out of the crevice. What's the hypothetical seeing? The world's largest, most sophisticated videocamera. We're capable of twelve knots, with bursts to fifteen, and what can a cold-blooded, glorified fence lizard manage? Yet so far it's matching our velocity. We leave the seamount, then it dives; and Jeffson is shouting, "After it, hurry! Hurry! Go!"

I get a feeling.

We're dropping into the cold, nearly lifeless water, and the smudge of light has dissolved. I mention my feeling to Jeffson, but he says, "No, that's crazy. You just keep diving, and we'll find it."

Except there's nothing to catch. Zip.

Finally he agrees. Finally he gives me grudging permission to climb back up on the seamount, back to the vent, and of course the minke steak

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is gone. Plus the crabs that were eating it. There's no trace of a strange beast, but there's this sense of something just having been here. It's like the cartoons where the road runner goes *poof*, leaving a residual outline hanging in the air.

Jeffson curses until winded, then he says, "Okay. Put down another steak, same place."

That leaves two frozen chunks of minke in the freezers.

"And back to our hiding place."

Settling into the crevice, I have an uneasy sensation. I find myself looking back over my shoulder, the engines and reactor blocking my view. "What if it's behind us?" I mention. "It could be on the backside of this ridge, studying us."

There is a long, long pause.

Then Jeffson says, "Unlikely," without his usual authority. And he swallows, not once but twice, the sound of them reverberating off the cold glass walls.

7

Dad had rented the blind and lake for the season, like I mentioned. It was my idea to go back again. Not to hunt, just to watch. Just us. It was a foggy morning, and we were walking to the fancy blind before first light. I remember seeing something moving and thinking it was nothing, but then it was closer and more blatant. It was a white something drifting out of the dark fog. And behind it were more white somethings, a line of them; and hardwired instincts made me stop in my tracks, maybe two inches from shore.

They were geese. Snow geese and a couple blues.

Dad was behind me, and he stopped too. And the geese, indifferent to a pair of human-shaped fenceposts, swam right past us. I was close enough to touch them. I expected stateliness out of them, but instead I saw a kind of matter-of-factness in their bearing, in the way they swam and held their heads, alert in some ways and thoroughly blind in others.

I remember them passing me just as the sun rose, submerging in the fog while the air turned radiant, silver-white and endless; and then Dad came up behind me, the two of us hearing the quiet honks and him saying, "You might live a thousand years and not have another moment like this."

I haven't thought of that moment in ages.

Which is wrong.

Those geese; the fog; my father's knowing voice. It occurs to me that all of them are dead now, and it's up to me to make them exist, if only

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by thinking of them. Which I haven't been doing, and it feels as if I've been breaking a sacred trust.

8

Three days.

Four.

Five, and nothing. Jeffson and I master our routine, minimizing contact in a thousand ways. We won't talk for hours, then only about the job; and we never eat at the same time. The bathroom is a sanctuary. Every motion is kept to a minimum. Wearing goggles, it feels as if we're completely alone, which is fine. And twice every day, at appointed times, I call the surface and chat. It expands the universe for a little while, always improving my mood.

My people have questions, comments. First things first. What's Jeffson doing? "Watching," I say, which means he isn't wearing his headphones. It's just us, and someone asks if I've hit him yet. "Hardly," I say. Has he made a pass, maybe? "Thank God not," I say. And laughter rains down for a minute. I envy their freedom, and they envy my job. Have we seen our hypothetical again?

"Not yet," I confess. "Sorry."

The designer comes on. "Let me talk to him, Mary. Please?"

Jeffson has to remove his goggles first, which scares him. He ends up grouchy, a shrill voice asking, "What is it?"

"I think I know how it sees you. I figured out a way."

That's been a big puzzle up above, I realize.

The designer says, "Its eyes can't be as large as Big-Eye, no. And it can't gather as much light. But what if it doesn't move its head for a long time? You said it wasn't moving . . . what if it stares at the same place for long enough, and its brain makes some kind of enhanced time-lapsed image of what it sees?"

"Maybe," Jeffson allows.

"Move around," I hear, "and it won't be able to track you so easily."

"Then it'll hear us," Jeffson counters. "It could track us that way, don't you think?"

A pause. "Yeah, maybe."

"Thanks, but no thanks." He makes a defiant sound. "It's going to get hungry, sooner or later. Do you agree?"

"Sure. Why not—?"

Jeffson removes his headphones, nothing more to add.

"Hello?"

I say, "Hi," so they know it's just me.

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The designer says, "Immersion doesn't help his mood, does it?"

"Not much."

"Listen," he tells me, "we were thinking something else. What if this critter thinks you're its enemy? What if it's got you pegged as some odd fish or who-knows-what?"

"And?"

"And it decides to play King of the Seamount. What then?"

"My," I say, "what a lovely notion."

"Be careful," says the designer. "Just promise us you'll take care."

As if anyone ever decides otherwise, I'm thinking. But I say, "Sure, I will," and my voice sounds thin, a little tired and a little nervous at the edges.

9

The smear of light—hypothetical; plesiosaur; whatever—appears that next day, playing that same keep-away trick. "It's got to be hungry," Jeffson tells me. "This time go hard and fast, then double back once we lose it. 'Kay, Morgan?"

I've already drawn up that plan, thank you.

"Okay?!"

"Okay!" Whatever I might say about Jeffson, he's genuine. His excitement and tensions are never false, and there's something infectious about it all. This is fun. I take us over the edge of the seamount, the hypothetical vanishing; then I curl high overhead and cut the engines to an idle, letting momentum and ballast carry us back down again. Tube worms emerge from the blackness, and something else. We surprise our quarry, and ourselves. It looks huge. It's longer than most whales, big in the body and that neck stretching out and out. Maybe this isn't a plesiosaur, but nature sure likes the shape. The head twists and glares back at us. Black eyes have a glint to them, a palpable life. Shredded worms hang from its mouth, blood's leaking everywhere; and when I rev the engines, it hears them, spitting the worms out and moving.

Turning. I'm afraid it's going to charge, but it doesn't. It turns and flees, Jeffson shouting, "Look at you! Look, look!" The damned thing is faster than it should be. My engines are red-lining, but I'm barely gaining. It's over barren rock, then over the edge, and we're on its ass, like a fighter plane after a fat bomber. I look, but there's no elaborate anal gill. Then I'm looking at something . . . something emerging from the hind end . . . and I hear Jeffson say something that sounds like, "Huh . . . ?"

There is an explosion. Silent, intense. Some kind of chemical reaction

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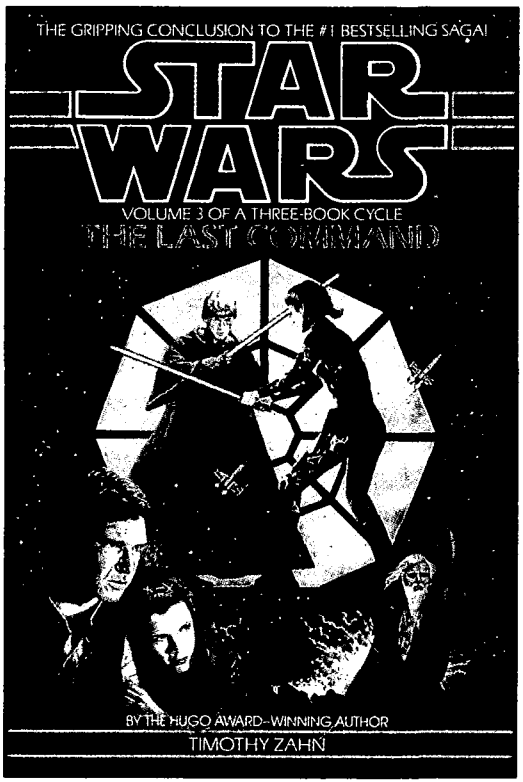
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produces light. Not a lot, really. A human eye would just squint and persevere. But Big-Eye absorbs and enlarges this glow. It's as if hot pokers are stabbing me. I scream and rip my goggles off, and Jeffson does the same. And then I'm flying by memory, thinking that we were awfully close to that rock slope and what if this clever quick hypothetical has led us—?

—and we hit bottom, no warning given. It's horrible, everything happening in slow motion. But my training and natural poise show themselves. I say, "Shit," with a low, almost quiet voice. You know the way dead pilots talk on their flight recorders? They're riding tons of metal and fuel into a city park, on a bright clear day, and the pilot always has the poise and wherewithal to sum everything up in that one perfect word:

"Shit."

10

Redundant systems. I paid for them, and I paid for them, and now I'm wishing that I could tell everyone about my wisdom.

Wearing goggles again, I'm seeing the world through a network of deep gouges. There's not much natural light here; I flip on a little two-watt spotlight to help us. Big-Eye is trapped in a bowl-shaped depression. No amount of coaxing or cursing moves us. The engines give a heartless hum, and dropping ballast just proves that we're jammed tight. We've married the geology, I'm thinking, pulling off my goggles now and looking over at Jeffson.

He's bleeding from the forehead, but not badly.

"What now?" he asks.

The radio. I try calling upstairs, but the unit is dead. Not enough redundancy here, obviously. So I tell him, "They'll start looking when we don't call in. We've got a couple robots dropped on cables—"

"But we're a long way from the vent," he reminds me.

I thank him for his insight.

"Luminescent ink," he says, changing subjects. "A perfect way to confuse your opponents."

I watch his face by the cabin lights, one hand trying to tease the cut closed. The man looks more confused than anything, helpless and hating it, and talking about the hypothetical seems like an exercise in control.

"We're the first ones to ever see one up close," he says. "Imagine. Isn't it amazing?"

I'm a little less inspired, frankly.

He puts the goggles back on, trying to appear happy and involved. He

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looks all around while I work with the various systems. Life support is whole, which is nice. Quit eating, and we might last half a year. I go back to the radio, trying to fix it; but nothing's wrong inside, and the mechanical arms have been sheared clean off. No way to check what's outside, I'm guessing.

"At least we'll get credit," he tells me.

"Excuse me?" I say.

"If we die here," my passenger announces, "at least we've got a record of everything. It's stored in the computers, saved and waiting for whoever salvages this bottle."

I make fists, suddenly tense.

"Belated credit is better than none," he informs me.

And I stare at him. Never in my life have I seen such a ludicrous mixture of fear and joy, bravado giving it backbone. He must be a lonely man, I'm thinking. In all these weeks of working together, has he ever mentioned friends? A family? An intelligent man, sure; but not smart enough to see that obvious problem. Jeffson's got his work, and he's got his arrogance, and that's the sum total. He's on the brink of dying; and finally he starts to shake, his voice cracking a little bit and him asking, "Do you know what I wish, Morgan?"

I open my hands and relax. "What do you wish?"

I can't see his eyes through the black goggles, but I'm guessing that he's crying. He gives a little moan, leaking sweat along with the blood. And I ask again, "What do you wish?"

"Forget it," he says.

Then he says, "Nothing."

I keep silent, watching him.

His head pivots, and he says, "I want to see the plesiosaur once more. That's all." Except he's looking through the floor now, watching nothing but the cold raw lava rock.

11

The seventh day, and nothing changes. Then the eighth, and nothing.

And now day nine.

Our air scrubbers keep working, and the water tastes only a little oily. By now the tethered robots will be mapping wider areas around the vent, but I've estimated our speed and distance. Discovery looks unlikely just now. Of course I'm not perfect—I could be wrong, which is cause for hope—and I'd like to think my people are tenacious and exceptional. But by now I'm sure they're wondering if we've been swallowed whole, like a spoon inside a big old pike.

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The hypothetical does arrive; at least Jeffson gets his final wish.

It hovers in the distance, staring and staring. But we don't give chase, which makes it curious, or maybe bolder. It swims close, pauses, then swims even closer. If we were a fish before, it's thinking, we might be a dead one now. Except we've got a little light on top, and that's a puzzle. The toothy face seems wary. Once, then again, it jettisons some of that bright ink, perhaps trying to coax us into moving. Or maybe just to illuminate the general area. Either way, it acts satisfied. Smug. It swims above us and behind us, apparently heading for the vent and dinner. Time passes—a minute or twenty—then all at once the submersible begins to shake. Not exactly hard, and I'm telling myself that it's an earthquake. But it's not. Even before I turn and look over my shoulder, I know. I know.

The creature's jaws are clamped down on the reactor, jerking and twisting. We're too big to eat, and too hard, but I don't think it cares. I hear teeth against metal, then someone says, "Dear God!" I don't know who. Then there's a distinct *crack*, nobody breathing; but it's not the hull breaking, it's a chunk of rock that's helped hold us down.

Another bite. The head seems enormous, so close that I could touch it if I could reach through the hull. It gets a good grip and jerks, and jerks, and jerks one last time, more rocks breaking and Big-Eye lifting off the bottom, rising fast, no ballast to slow us, up and up and both of us hollering, rising and dancing and stumbling over each other, into an ugly heap.

12

Of course it wasn't trying to save us.

Maybe that first bite was out of curiosity, or maybe it already smelled the minke steaks. It's easy to guess what happened from the damage. Our impact sheared off the mechanical arms, and it sheared open the two remaining freezers, dumping their cargo under us. The creature was chasing a tasty meal, and first it had to pull the inedible carcass aside.

My people were awfully glad to see us pop to the surface. It's early evening, and they've lifted us and Big-Eye up onto the deck. There's applause for its durability and sadness for the damage. But at least the reactor is healthy. At least three quarters of everything can be salvaged. I take a few shots at my team for not finding us. Any big blows can come later, in private. And Jeffson is talking fast, having the time of his life telling about the plesiosaur. We're all his friends, and he's asking everyone, "Would you like to see it on TV? We'll pull images from the on board computers—"

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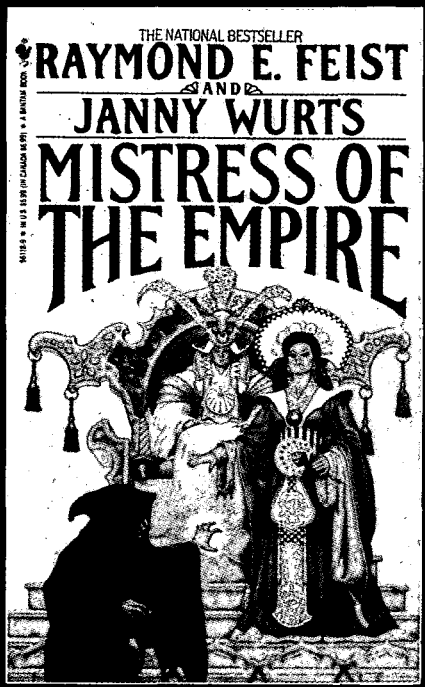

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"We've already seen it," the designer interrupts. "Sorry."

People are laughing, and they're not laughing. I can tell just by looking that they're keeping lids on themselves.

"What do you mean you've seen it?" Jeffson growls, then grows concerned. "You can't have—!"

"A lot's happened in the last couple days." My people start walking us to the galley, more laughing accompanied with bright smartass smiles.

Someone puts a tape into the TV. The mechanic says, "This was CNN a couple days ago." The tape begins early in a news story, tube worms standing before us and something very familiar swimming fast above the worms. The newscaster says something about an Australian team, and I know them. They bought BLIND from us, although nobody mentions that. Instead the newscaster talks about a deep sea oasis, these images just released to the press and not ten hours old. Which, we learn, places their discovery nearly a day after our own astonishing success.

Jeffson gives out an enormous, gut-shot shriek. Then he collapses, and the mechanic says, " 'Falls in a heap.' That's what I had in the pool! I win, I win!"

And I'm the one who kneels and asks Jeffson if he's okay, if he wants any help, the others laughing and me honestly saying, "Sorry. I know it was important, and I'm sorry."

13

We're homeward bound, sitting across from each other in the galley. Jeffson's been drinking, and he's reached the sloppy-voice stage. They're talking on TV about the plesiosaurs again. All sorts of gills are being proposed, including rebuilt anuses, while other experts are holding out for some mix of lungs and gills. We earn a tag-on mention just before the Toyota commercial. "A second group reports a similar beast . . ." So on, and so on.

Jeffson growls to himself.

"How do you feel?" I ask.

No response.

So I say, "It could be worse. You could be dead."

"Martyrdom," he whispers longingly.

"I don't believe that," I tell him. Then I stare until he blinks, just a little bit, and I tell him, "You know, there's still a lot of room for work on the critter. It's big enough to carry plenty of careers, I'm thinking."

He gives a little so-what shrug.

"And there's more," I say. "Just from what you've told me, I can see all sorts of possibilities."

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Interest flickers in the glazed eyes.

And I don't say anything. I just sit back and grin for a minute, making him ask, "What kinds of possibilities?"

"There've been other volcanic upwellings, right? Not just in the Cretaceous?"

He gives a tiny nod.

"So maybe some other major-league predators have migrated down from the surface. Or maybe they evolved there to begin with." Another flicker in the eyes, yes. "Our plesiosaur was worried about us. Why? Did Big-Eye look like one of its enemies?"

Jeffson stirs and says, "Maybe."

"Some hypothetical benthic critter that eats plesiosaurs? Maybe that's what's waiting down there."

His sloppy voice says, "Since the Cambrian . . . plenty of time to evolve . . . I don't know what—"

"Exactly! Now you've got to go find out what!"

Happiness blossoms, the man asking me, "How soon can you rebuild your submersible? A year?"

"Maybe less," I say.

A bright, bright smile.

And I tell him, "No, you're not hiring us again. Don't even think about it."

That surprises him, and he asks, "Why?"

"Because," I say, "you need to move right away. If I can imagine such a thing, won't your competitors?"

A nod.

"And because I need long-term, high-paying clients. Otherwise my bank won't loan me enough to rebuild, and you can't be that kind of client. Sorry."

Again, a nod.

"And finally," I say. "Finally . . ."

"What?"

I tell a story. Or many stories, really. Whenever I screwed up as a kid, Dad had the same speech. He changed it enough to keep it half-fresh, but it always talked about people being prototypes. First-drafts. That kind of thing. Each of us is something never seen before, existing in a world that didn't exist ten minutes ago, and we're allowed our screw-ups and weaknesses. Being a prototype is tough, he'd tell me, but if you live a good life, you can fix the worst of your weaknesses—

"What's this have to do with me?" asks the sloppy voice.

"Right now," I say, "I don't want to dive with you. The thought of being bottled up with you for weeks at a shot . . . well, it wasn't all that fun the first time. Sorry."

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He surprises me, looking a little stunned. Almost injured, even.

"You're abrasive," I say, "and short-tempered. You're disliked by my team, and I'm sorry—"

"I never knew," he whispers, honestly astonished. "I never, never guessed . . . nobody told me. . . !"

"I just did," I say.

He nods.

"Change your nature," I promise, "and we'll talk again."

Jeffson stares up at the ceiling, asking it, "Am I so difficult? Since when?"

And I shut my eyes, just for a minute, picturing a familiar lake and myself as a girl. Swimming shapes emerge from the fog, filing past me, and they're tiny, tiny plesiosaurs, long necks and toothy heads and big dark smiling eyes. A parade of plesiosaurs, and I'm standing close enough to touch them, only I know better than to try. ●

WHO'S WHO: a Prolegomenon

If we all demand attention
and if none of us attends,

Can anyone hope to be known beyond
the circle of his friends?

Whose figures shall be cast in bronze
or chiseled into stone?

For the hundred who are famous,
a million die unknown.

Now I would love to be remembered
for a thought I had today,

But so would you, and so would she,
and so would Thomas Gray.

Alas, there is not memory
enough to go around.

How many must be lost or slaughtered
for the one sheep that is found.

—Tom Disch

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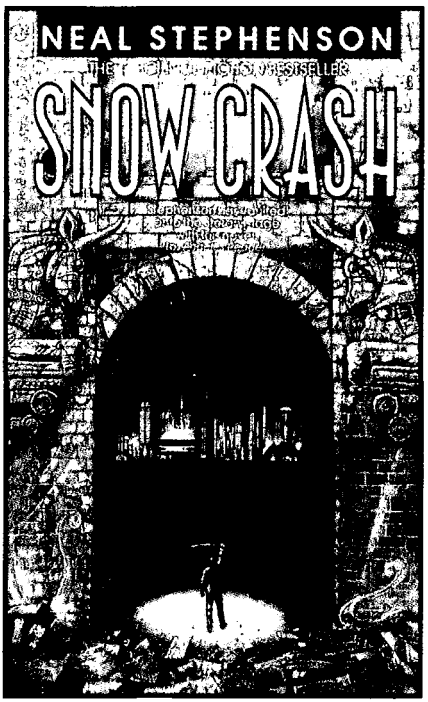

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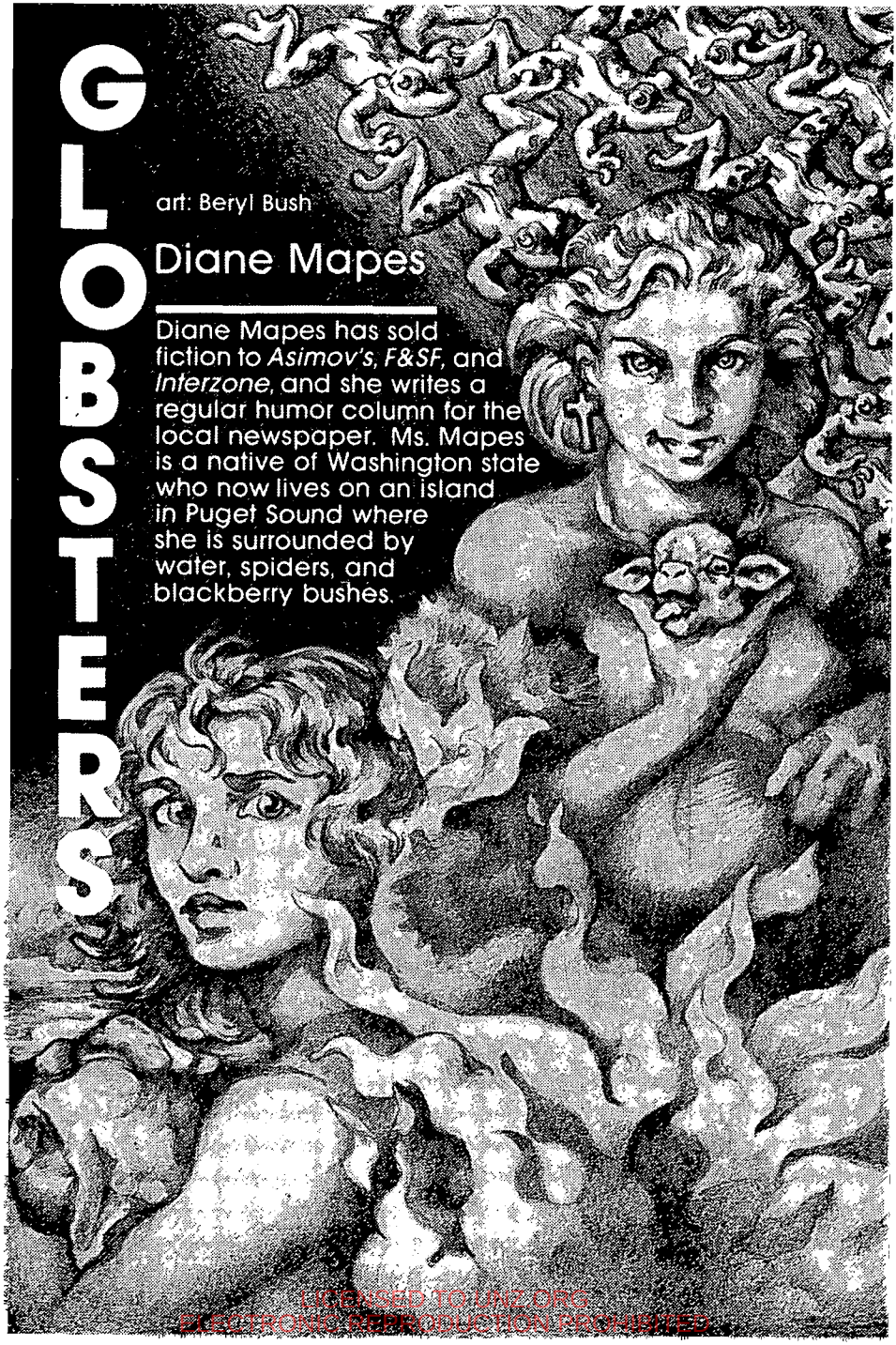
GLOBSTERS

art: Beryl Bush

Diane Mapes

Diane Mapes has sold fiction to *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, and *Interzone*, and she writes a regular humor column for the local newspaper. Ms. Mapes is a native of Washington state who now lives on an island in Puget Sound where she is surrounded by water, spiders, and blackberry bushes.



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A type of sea monster not mentioned in the previous chapter, of which the evidence is scant and extremely grisly, emerges from reports of shapeless lumps of hair-covered flesh occasionally cast up on beaches. (Naturalist) Ivan Sanderson, with his genius for inventing names, called them Globsters.

—John Michell and Robert J.M. Rickard
Living Wonders: Mysteries and
Curiosities of the Animal World

Samantha wasn't the type of person that I hung out with normally, even though most of my friends you wouldn't exactly call normal either. Samantha was just an acquaintance; I'm not sure I ever knew her last name, or whether her first name was her real one. Sure, I knew where she lived and who she slept with, but basically she was just someone to chat with at parties, or sit with on the #43 if the seat beside her was empty. Occasionally, I'd see her coming out of Astrology et al. with a stack of exotic-looking trade paperbacks on Aleister Crowley or the Druids, and we'd duck into the Greek place across the street to catch up on the latest bit of weird goings-on over a cheap glass of beer or their awful coffee.

Samantha was the only person I knew who read the *Fortean Times*, or had even heard of Charles Fort and his collection of scientific anomalies. Since one of my own quirks was an affinity for the cryptic and the bizarre, I enjoyed our occasional discussions of sea serpents, man-eating trees, or teleportation. I liked to think my relationship with Samantha was, for the most part, an intellectual one. She met certain needs.

Casually mention an inexplicable mound of flesh washing up on an ocean beach to the ladies at *most* temp jobs, and you'd be looking for new work the next week. Talk about those same mounds (or globsters, as the cryptozoologists of the Sixties had dubbed them) with *Samantha*, and she'd usually order you another beer, and a side of oysters to go with it. Raw, of course.

Samantha loved weird. Samantha *lived* weird, too. Her hair fluctuated between about six basic colors. She wore more crucifixes than anyone I have ever met, although not all of them hung right-side up. From a few casually dropped comments, I gathered that she was at times hetero, at other times, *not*. And from some of the comments I'd heard from friends, I knew she was a member of—or at least had some dealings with—the local contingent of pagans.

Not that any of that was *that* weird. I had other friends who dabbled in *all* of those areas. Dilettante witches, dilettante gays, dilettante Catholics. And, perhaps the most frightening of all, dilettante hairdressers. But something about Samantha was different from all the others. An

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earnestness, perhaps. A sly undertow of credibility. Sometimes, when she showed me the latest crumpled newspaper clipping about cattle mutilation out by Enumclaw, or a rain of frogs north of Bellingham, I got the feeling that perhaps, just *perhaps*, Samantha knew something *more* about these occurrences than she let on.

I never questioned her about this, of course; I never asked her *any* questions about her personal life and vice versa—that was the unspoken rule of our relationship. We were just acquaintances, fellow connoisseurs of the odd and the arcane. Most times, my suspicions would pass soon enough anyway. I'd take a few sips of my beer, Samantha would take a few sips of hers. She'd grimace at its sourness, castigate the bartender, and I'd see that, yes, this was just a woman across from me—a woman wearing a bit too much make-up, a few too many crosses, a woman whose hair color sometimes bordered on the ridiculous, but just a *woman*, nonetheless. Not an evil witch, not a mutilator of helpless hooved animals, most likely not even a lapsed Catholic. And the times when the feelings *wouldn't* pass, when I was convinced that Samantha *was* all of those undesirable things, and more, I would ask myself if I really *cared*, if it affected me or the relationship we had. And the answer would always be no.

And so our relationship went.

I don't remember when it was that I started to notice that Samantha had gained weight; perhaps the weight had always been there, lurking underneath her black velvet capes, her ancient dashikis. One day, I saw her coming out of the Sindhu store, a hole-in-the-wall in the university district that inexplicably survived solely on the sale of incense and cheap imported Indian scarves, and I realized that she had gone from svelte to voluptuous and was teetering dangerously on the brink of hefty.

Of course, I didn't blurt this out when I stopped to talk to her, but, as was Samantha's odd tendency, she seemed to notice that *I'd* noticed.

"You're right, I have gained weight," she said grinning over a plate of feta cheese and oily olives. "I thought it might be fun to go all out for the holidays. Whole hog, I suppose you'd say. But I don't know if I like it now. Too cumbersome. I'll probably get rid of it soon. Weight doesn't stay on me long."

This launched a discussion of my own battles with weight, and then that led to stories about starvation diets, and after that it was the latest "Human Skeleton" story in the *Weekly World News*, a twenty-nine-year-old woman who had supposedly shrunk to a mere sixty-seven pounds and was now set to marry Herve Villechaize, and *that* led to a man Samantha'd heard about here in town who hadn't eaten anything at all for five months except for candle wax and black-and-white glossies of Vanna White, and *that* led to a woman I'd heard about in France who refused

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to eat anything that had the letter "e" in it, and *that* led to a letter she'd received from a friend outside Chernobyl who said she'd heard about a two-headed baby, and so our afternoon went.

And somehow, I never got around to asking Samantha why weight didn't stay on her long, or, since Christmas was seven months away and she was hardly Jewish, *what* holiday, exactly, was she talking about?

I saw her again at the University Book Store sale, several weeks after that. The store was packed, which is the norm for any sale where you can get a copy of *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* for just $2.98. That was the draw for *me*, at least, although I knew that it was more likely the ninety-eight cent Penguin classic editions that pulled most of this crowd of Goretex- and Lycra-clad folk out of the comfort of their corncob-burner heated homes. Whatever *they* were here for, *I* had my arms full of books on ant behavior, and the disappearance of the Roanoke settlement, and Nebraska crop circles, and British rat kings, and, since I was in a rather contrary mood, the sole remaining copy of Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* . . . and that was when I saw Samantha on the other side of the table of books I was scrutinizing. Actually, I saw the books in her arms—Max Brod's biography of Kafka, an art book full of Russian icons, some cheap horror novels, something called *The History of Evil,* a collection of insect lore, and the good old *Necronomicon*—and I knew it *had* to be her.

And she looked even bigger than she had before! Maybe it was just what she was wearing, black tights and a small white T-shirt sprinkled with bullet holes, but I noticed for the first time, that my friend—or my acquaintance, rather—Samantha, was truly *fat.* Her legs were solid as pilings, her face was puffy, her arms, busy clutching her books to her chest, were thick and pink; the sleeves of her coat barely spanned her waist, crossing at the wrist. She was as big as a house. Not that it bothered me or affected the way I felt about her, it was just that it was *there.* I have to keep assuring myself that it *was* there, especially in light of what happened later. She really *was* fat. I *saw* it on her, covering over her cheekbones, filling out her pants.

Maybe she saw me looking, too, because that was the first thing she mentioned.

"I've just been enjoying myself so *much* lately," she said, flipping through a collection of stories by the survivors of Auschwitz. "Consuming *everything.* I go through these moods now and then. Every hundred years or so."

She laughed, and I did, too.

"I'll be getting rid of it soon, though," she said, tucking the story collection on top of her pile of books. "I'm working on it now, in fact. It'll be gone by Christmas. You'll see."

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"That's when I always gain weight," I confided, trying to make her feel more comfortable. "All those Christmas cookies and candy canes and gnawed turkey carcases."

She gave me an odd smile. "That reminds me," she said. "I should probably tell you that I'll be pregnant for awhile." She looked at her watch. "Approximately seven more months. Are you almost finished here? I was thinking we could get some coffee."

We made our purchases and went for coffee at a new Indian place up the street that I'd spotted when I was looking for pennies a few days before. Once there, we sat hunched over the rickety table and compared books. Samantha seemed especially interested in the book on rat kings, snickering over the pictures of the poor animals with their tails all tied together, as if she herself had done the deed. I skimmed her *Necronomicon,* wondering at the chalk I saw nestled in the bottom of her Washington School and Office Supply bag, wondering also at the casualness with which she'd announced that she was expecting a baby.

As we didn't usually discuss anything of a personal nature, I didn't ask her about it, although I was curious as to why this odd new development should come about. Samanatha did not strike me as the maternal type; I wasn't even sure she was heterosexual at that time. I found it strange that suddenly she would be wanting a child, especially since she didn't seem to be *that* well-off financially, and I knew from my single friends who had children that it was not usually something you did just for kicks. Samantha didn't volunteer any information, however—except that she thought the curry looked good and that she was going to have some—and I didn't push her for it. Strange things intrigued me, and I worked over the various possibilities in bed each night, like a tongue worrying at that hole in your gums where the tooth was.

I did not see Samantha much in the ensuing months. I lost my temp job at the import company, and began another with a hotel along Aurora Avenue, doing housekeeping and such. The city was hot for a few months, attracting the usual indigents and tourists, and then it became cloaked in its familiar wool-gray covering, seeping rain at odd intervals like a recovering widow at a church potluck. The bottoms of my jeans stayed wet, as did my socks and my feet from a cancer of imperceptible cracks in my tennis shoes, and I settled, agreeably, into a winter.

My job at the hotel was not anything to write home about, supposing one ever had the inclination to write home. I took wrinkled cum-and-KY-stained sheets off of hard, uncomfortable beds; I put pressed cum-and-KY-stained sheets back on. My boss tried to persuade me to join her in some of that staining and wrinkling, but I demurred. I got more satisfaction lying in bed alone reading about the strange chain of fate that led to the creation of a winged cat than letting a woman with an

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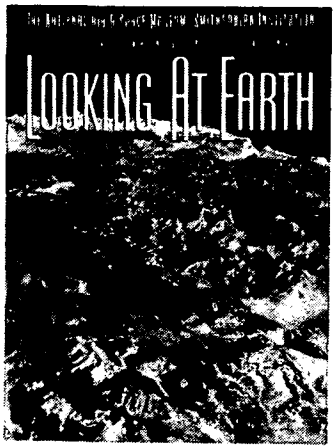

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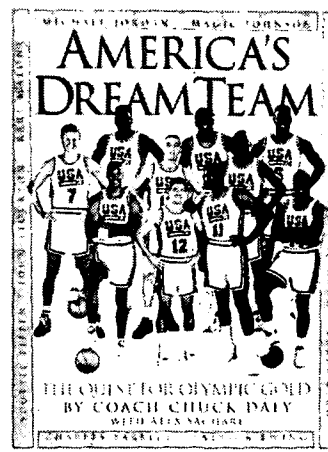

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incredibly large build-up of tartar on her teeth put her clammy hands inside my maid's uniform.

I hitchhiked to Cincinnati for a Fortean convention at the end of October, and went to the standard panel discussions on avian abductions, globsters, coelacanths, and the occasional rain of worms. No one really had anything enlightening to *say* on any of the subjects—no explanations, no postulations—just that they had documented a shower of lemmings on thus and such a date, or that a fifty-seven-year-old Harvard professor had reported the sighting of a pterodactyl the January before. When I returned home, I found that my boss at the hotel had managed to find a maid who was willing to join her between those stiff white sheets, and my job cleaning rooms was no longer mine. It was not particularly a blow. In fact, I celebrated that night by attending a party at a friend's house, in honor of Janet Leigh's birthday.

And Samantha was there, this time with a thick mass of red curls cascading down her back. And, as she promised, she was pregnant, all right, her belly stretching her sweater taut across it like a bowling bowl stuffed inside a sock. Other than that, she looked gorgeous, although not in the way that pregnant women are *supposed* to look gorgeous—the alleged glow of skin, sparkle of eyes, and so forth.

Samantha had lost weight, and it showed. Her face was thin, accented by perfect cheekbones. She was wearing black tights again, and, inside of them, her legs were slender, and slimly muscled.

"Samantha, you look *wonderful!*" I said, kneeling beside the chair where she was holding court—two men and two women of varying ages were perched about her.

"Of *course* I look wonderful. That's the whole point," she said, leaning over and plucking a thick piece of baklava from a young blond boy's plate. He immediately picked another triangle from his plate and began to feed her. I saw what looked like rope burns at his wrist. She bit into the pastry—and, from his wince, into his fingers as well—and winked at me. "I haven't seen much of you lately. Have you been away?"

I told her of the convention I'd been to, relaying the choicest tidbits I'd heard in the hotel bar, stories about child mutilations where pieces of the victims were found in nearby shopping malls, stories about snake thefts by a man whose house was reportedly crawling with six hundred of the reptiles. She in turn told me about a recent report from a farmer up in Blaine who claimed to have come across a gathering of women gnawing at the carcass of one of his cows' premature calves, then dug out of her purse a clipping about a woman in Idaho who claimed that her goat could count to ten, spell its own name, and whistle "Greensleeves." We laughed and spoke of such things for awhile, then I circulated the party, talking with other friends of their lives, their jobs, and

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their partners' tendencies toward anemic blondes or bad music from the seventies. Occasionally, I would see Samantha lean over and lick the blond boy's ear or bite into a proffered piece of chocolate or fruit or flesh. I was watching her strip a chicken bone of meat when my friend Allen spoke at my back.

"You're friends with her, aren't you?" I turned, and he nodded in Samantha's direction. I shrugged.

"I know her," I said. "We share some common interests."

Allen studied me, as if looking for some kind of hidden meaning behind my words. Later, I wondered if Allen was looking for some kind of *sign* —cryptic runes in the pupils of my eyes, perhaps the number of the beast crawling beneath the hair of my scalp, the barest hint of horns cresting over my wiry black locks.

"I know her, too," he said, looking over my shoulder toward Samantha. I turned and saw her laughing and stroking her belly as another woman leaned over her, swinging a pair of tiny leather shoes. "She's not . . . " His voice dropped away to nothing and I saw that Samantha was staring at *him* now, that odd smile on her lips again. A sigh came out of him, much like air escaping a punctured bicycle tire. "She's not . . . " was all he said. Over and over again, to the lamp in the corner, to the bannister on the stairway, to the plants, to a bowl of cashews, like a scratched record. Allen left the party shortly thereafter, something I found strange, as the party was being held at his house. I left sometime after one, catching a ride to my apartment with an intense black woman who insisted on asking me probing questions about my childhood.

For some reason, I found I could not sleep that night, even though I was still tired from my trip and from the black woman's insistent questions: "Why *don't* you remember your ninth birthday party? Did something *happen* at that party that made you *block it out?*" I lay in the center of my small bed, thinking of Samantha, and of the blond boy's bitten finger, and of Allen's hiss of air as Samantha fixed him with her eyes, and of that belly and the child that lay within it.

"Of *course* I look wonderful, that's the whole point," she had said, so confident, so sure of herself. And she had looked wonderful, as if pregnancy had taken everything already beautiful in her and enhanced it until it was almost painful to look at. As if this pregnancy was just some sort of awkward but eventually rewarding *beauty* ritual she went through, like a woman wearing an avocado face mask into bed to ensure a smooth, clean complexion come morning. Explanations began to turn in my head, slide across the realm of possibility and become brighter, like the headlights of the trucks that slid across the wall of my apartment before turning in to their warehouse destinations. Before I drifted off, I remembered that I had heard Samantha mention she would be attending

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a party the next month at a mutual friend's. I had thought it odd, since she was also due to deliver a baby at approximately the same time.

In mid-December, I found another job, this time wrapping up people's Christmas presents at the University Book Store. The pay was low and I had to wear my own clothes to work—and clean ones at that—but no one tried to seduce me behind the stacks of reference/foreign language, and I was able to slip an occasional remaindered paperback inside my purse before heading home on the bus. I didn't do much in the way of Christmas shopping myself, as was my custom. My family did not celebrate Christmas, or, at least, I did not celebrate Christmas with my family—perhaps the black woman's theories of my unhappy childhood were correct, at that. I spent the month reading books that looked like they'd been caught in the midst of a marital dispute, and following stories on the news about families found frozen to death in their warm beds, or about sea cows with faces like humans. Sometimes I wondered at my tendency to shun the ordinary and seek out life's oddities, trying to remember if I *was* blocking out some horrible incident from my ninth birthday party that would *explain it all*—my reclusiveness, my propensity for the makings of bad pulp fiction, perhaps even my crooked teeth. But I could never remember anything, and, relieved, my mind would turn to the question of Samantha.

She was, indeed, at the party which my friend, Gaylord, held at the end of the month—or at least *some* of her was. She had obviously delivered her baby. I was sitting on the couch when she came through the front door, although for a moment I didn't recognize her. Her hair was blonde now and quite short; she wore an expensive fur that I had never seen before. Her waist was bound with a length of black silk which looked to be a man's tie. She looked stunning.

"Congratulations on your new baby," I said as her eyes lit on me. "And on being able to find a sitter so soon."

"It was nothing," she said, plucking a bottle of wine from her purse. "Open this, Carl," she said to a Mediterranean-looking man who had followed her in the door. I wondered when the blond boy had been dispensed with. "It practically takes care of itself. Definitely what you'd call a low-maintenance child."

She laughed then, and I laughed with her, although I found it strange that she would refer to her child as an "it." Carl brought over two glasses of wine, and she asked if I'd heard about the case of spontaneous combustion that had happened in a small northern California town on Christmas Eve. I sipped my wine and assured her that I had. Her eyes glistened as she talked of it—I thought for a moment that I saw the flare of dancing flames. I wondered if *my* eyes had glistened so in the past as I had rattled off the gruesome details of mutilations and deformities.

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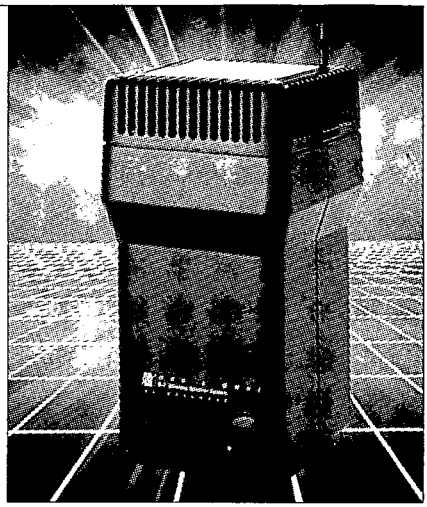

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We talked for a moment more, then Samantha was swept off by a crowd intent on summoning the spirit of the Marquis de Sade, who had supposedly died on this very night three hundred years earlier. I stayed in my corner brooding about the callousness with which Samantha had talked about her child, and by the time I'd finished my glass of wine and then hers, which she'd left on the end table beside me, I was convinced that she had simply left the child alone to fend for itself. After another glass of wine, white this time, it was only a short jump from there to my decision to find out for myself if that was really the case. I knew that Samantha lived close by in this neighborhood; that I could walk there and easily return to the party within fifteen minutes. I pulled my coat around me, paused to fill my pockets with Ritz crackers—the closest thing I could find to a baby's biscuit—and was out the door.

On the way there, I tried to figure out why I was obsessing about Samantha and her child. It was not like me to act on any kind of impulse like this. Usually, I kept to myself, regarding life from a distance—observing the occasional jog from the norm with an appreciative eye, enduring the rest as one might endure Spam sandwiches if one were hungry enough. But here I was, hurrying down an icy waterfront sidewalk towards a house where I had never once been invited, a house rented by a woman with whom I'd shared coffee and conversation, but no secrets.

But Samantha, I felt, was *pregnant* with secrets. And now was the time to find them out.

There were no lights on in the house when I found it, not even the porch light, which facilitated a quick entry thanks to a piece of bank-issued plastic. I closed the door behind me quietly, thinking I might wake the baby if I didn't, but even then, I sensed something wrong. The house was dark, but my eyes quickly adjusted well-enough so that I could see the living room. It was clean, one wall covered with shelves full of books, a music system, a television and a large selection of video-tapes. The couch had an old tapestry thrown over one arm and some yellowed manuscripts spread across the cushions. The walls held a few compact colored pencil prints reminiscent of Escher, and a large portrait of a woman in black swallowing a sun. I moved into the center of the room, listening for the sounds of crying, but there were none. The air held *some* kind of presence, though. I followed it quietly through the house, noting that there were no bottles of formula cluttering the kitchen counters, no stacks of freshly laundred diapers on the bathroom dresser. I went into the bathroom and opened the cupboards. No baby oil, no baby powder, although there were some expensive powders and oils on the mirrored shelves. The only pins I saw were long and sharp and topped with tiger's eyes. I moved down the hallway toward the bedroom and paused, looking in.

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There was no crib or playpen, no mobile of soft pastel rainbows hanging from the ceiling. There was only a bed and a dresser, and clothes and books, and a GE toaster oven box shoved haphazardly into the corner of the room, underneath an open window. A breeze sucked the curtain in and out sporadically, like the cheeks of an old man. I stared at the toaster oven box for a long time, the night wind rustling my hair. There were clothes piled on and around it, dropped there thoughtlessly, like Kleenexes around a bathroom wastebasket. I looked down at it, telling myself that Samantha had lost her baby in the delivery but didn't want anyone to know, telling myself that Samantha had, of course, left her child with someone else. But I knew it wasn't true. I could see something moving within the folds of the blankets; a small form shuddering inside.

I came closer, and paused at the edge of the box, running my fingers along the stickery cardboard edge. A pair of Samantha's jeans were tossed carelessly over one side. I picked them up and placed them on the dresser. I did the same for the earrings and stockings and sweaters that had been dropped within the baby's makeshift crib. The form under the blankets shuddered again, and I reached up and drew them back.

It was not a baby. It was *flesh,* a dimpled elongated roll of flesh, like a large white football. There were no features, no limbs, no smell, no breath. It was just flesh, *Samantha's* flesh, I knew, her *fat,* sloughed off and channeled into her belly, then birthed and carelessly dumped into a crumpled cardboard box amid a tangle of dirty lingerie and cast-off jewelry. I stared down at it, seeing light golden hair in spots, a dapple of moles in others. I reached out toward it, and it quivered as if it felt the presence of a hand above it, and, beyond that, a heart, a soul. I touched it, and it was warm. I knew it wouldn't be warm much longer.

"Like I said, definitely a low-maintenance child," Samantha said behind me.

I jumped, and the thing in the box jumped, too, like a cow jabbed with a cattle prod.

She was standing in the doorway, her hands spread wide against the walls on either side of her. The fur was casually tossed over her shoulders as her jeans had been tossed over the lip of the box. Carl was not with her; the red fingernail of her left index finger tapped pleasantly on the wall as she watched me.

"What is this?" I whispered, nodding toward the thing in the box.

"Nothing, really," Samantha said, and moved into the room. "Certainly not anything you'd ever see in your *Fortean Times.* It'll dry up soon enough, like a piece of old roast. They always do." The fur dropped from her shoulders and began to smolder. A moment later, it had erupted into flame. Then it was gone. I blinked.

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"They don't do well outside the womb," she said and came to stand beside me at the edge of the crib. "Nothing to feed on out here."

"It's dying," I said.

Samantha frowned. "I liked you better when you stayed out of my business." I watched her finger a silver sheep's head at her throat. It shimmered under her fingers and began to bleat. I grew hot.

"I like people who appreciate life's little wonders," she said, continuing to stare down at the thing in the crib. "And who know better than to ask too many questions about them. I thought you were one of those people. Perhaps I was wrong."

The sheep continued to bleat between her fingers, and, suddenly seeming to notice it, Samantha crushed its head as if she were squeezing a clove of baked garlic onto her French bread. She looked at her fingers, grimaced, and wiped them on the side of the box. It was the same good-natured grimace she used when she tasted the sour beer we used to share at the Greek place along the Ave.

"You did this," I said, nodding toward the lump of flesh. "And you've done it before."

Samantha laughed. "Yes, I've done it before. I've done many things. I'm very old, you see. Perhaps not old enough to have grown tired of good baklava"—she slapped her tiny hips and laughed—"or good company for that matter, but old. You probably couldn't fathom it, really. Unless of course, you'd like to come along for the ride."

Samantha's fingers, still stained with blood and sheep's brains, touched my cheek.

"I always thought you had great potential, my sweet," she said, looking into my eyes. I felt her fingernails sink into my cheek. My skin grew hot, as if it were starting to melt, like the head of that sheep.

"I could show you things. *Give* you things," she said. "You would be cared for." Her eyes fell on the thing in the box, then flicked back up at me. She smiled, a quick snap of lips. "Really."

In my mind, I saw myself knocking Samantha to the floor and dashing out of her house, into the streets, and down an alley, to catch a bus on the other side, and make it home safe to my apartment, where I would pack my scant savings, my favorite pair of socks, my complete *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, and grab the first ride out of town with a chatty truckdriver who had just won $3300 in the state Lotto and wanted to celebrate by having me give him a blow job as he barreled toward Portland with a full load of Nestle's Quik.

But that didn't happen. Samantha withdrew her hand, and I paused only a moment before scooping up the piece of her that lay in the box and nestling it in my arms. It nestled back, still a creature in need of comfort for all its shapeless transience.

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"Goodbye, Samantha," I said, and turned and left the room.

She made a surprised little huff—I could almost see her grimace again—and then, behind me, I heard "Oh, all *right*, spoil sport! Goodbye!" I was out on the street a moment later, looking down at the lump of dimpled white flesh cradled within my arms. It couldn't look back, of course. It had no eyes, no mouth, no arms or legs. I hoped it had no soul, as well. A flash caught my eye and I glanced back toward Samantha's house. The bedroom window shimmered for a moment, as if full of flame, then went dark.

"I think your mother just moved," I said, pausing at the water's edge. It slapped against the pale concrete abutment like that truckdriver would no doubt have liked me to slap his *nouveau riche* white ass.

I stared out at the water, wondering at the nature of wombs and of those mounds of flesh, globsters, they flippantly called them, that occasionally washed up on ocean beaches. The thing in my arms shuddered, as if stretching out toward the water, and I quit wondering. I'd *seen* what dried-up roast beef looked like. At least in the water, it would have half a chance; out here, it would have none. A car passed behind me in the street, its engine covering up the sound of the splash as I slipped Samantha's baby into the water.

On the way home, I thought about that case of spontaneous combustion in Northern California the month before, wondering if they had found any trace of fur among the charred bedclothes. I thought about rat kings with their tails snaggled together in cruel knots, and about the mutilated bodies of sheep. I thought about the panel discussion on globsters that I'd heard two months earlier in Cincinnati, wondering if any of them had been found with baby blankets.

When I got home that night, I burned my *Fortean Times*. ●

TAB A
this dream
I had about
a censor
censoring
SLOT B

—Damon Knight

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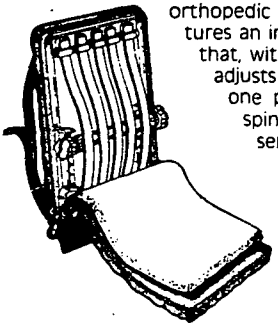

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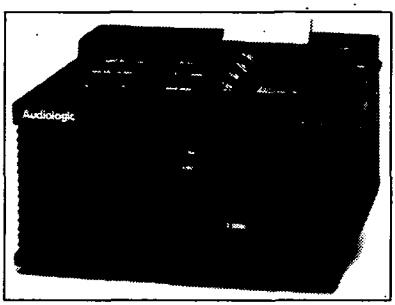

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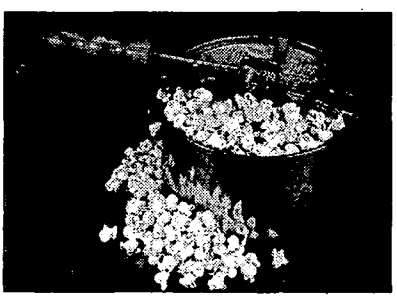

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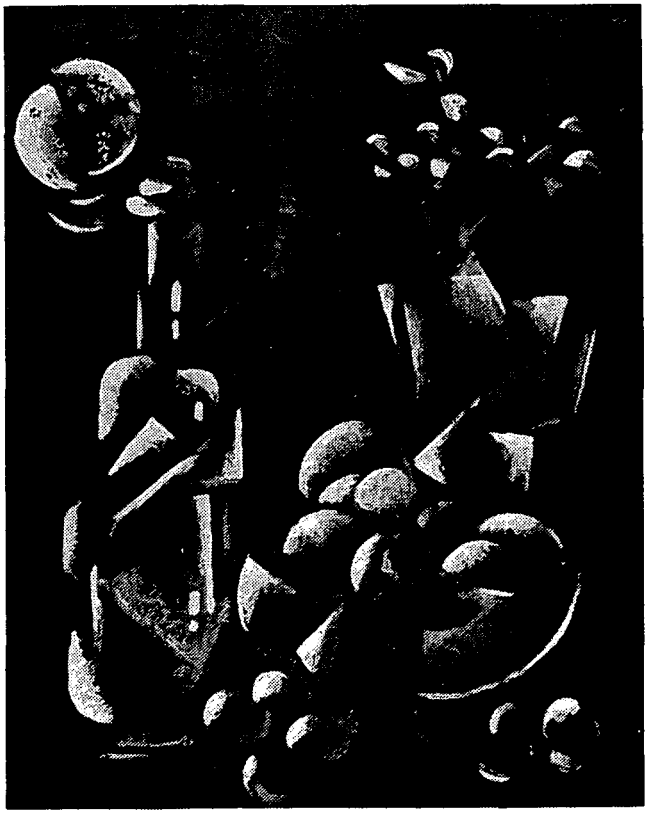
PICASSO DECONSTRUCTED: ELEVEN STILL-LIFES

Michael Swanwick

The author tells us that, "after a recent visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I made up a few possible story openings based on their current show and posted them on GEnie. Gardner Dozois liked them and challenged me to put together enough for him to publish. I did, largely because it was the only way I could justify buying the exhibit catalog. But also because it was fun. Mostly writing isn't fun. Writing these was."

art: Steve Cavallo



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1. When you eat at Picasso's table, use a long spoon. That's what Dali told me. And when I saw what Pablito had done to the plates I knew what he meant. But I didn't care. I was there to make him an offer he couldn't refuse.

I was on a mission from Van Gogh.

2. There were flowers in Picasso's garden such as grew nowhere else in Europe: hallucinatory blossoms from African marshes that no white man had ever seen, thorny meat-eaters from Ophir and the sunken continent of Mu, strangler vines from the steamy jungles of Venus that stalked, paralyzed, and digested their prey in a slow and hypnotic manner that can only be described as erotic.

After the first month, Picasso's landlady forbade him to ever again put out saucers of milk for the stray cats.

3. While he took advantage of their techniques, Picasso never joined the surrealist movement. The standard biographies credit this to a ruinous feud with Magritte, to a habitual profligacy that rendered him unable to raise the money (he was too proud to beg an exemption) for the dues, or, more bizarrely, because he refused to have his left earlobe pierced for the initiatory earring Man Ray had designed. All untrue.

The actual reason he never joined the surrealists is that they met on Thursday evenings, and this conflicted with his favorite radio serial, "The Minotaur."

Though forgotten today, in its time "The Minotaur" was the darling of French intellectuals. Its eponymous antihero was an international thief and existential murderer. His adventures—if the term can be applied to random events consistently rendered bloody by a savage imagination—took place in the sewers and ateliers of Paris. It is no secret that Picasso identified with him.

4. There was a planet on the work table where the Maître kept his cans of brushes. A real one—not an image or a model, but a genuine planet, with oceans and land masses and white clouds caught in great swirling weather patterns. A world small enough to hold in your hand.

I caught my breath. It was heart-stoppingly beautiful. "Wh-where—?" I stammered. "How did you—?"

Scowling like a camel, Picasso put down his palette. "I thought I told you to be quiet!" Then, seeing the object of my entranced gaze, he softened his voice. "A present," he said. "From certain admirers. You like it, eh?"

"Very—very much," I managed to say.

"Bah!" He swept it off the table and sent it clattering into the trash

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bin. *"C'est merde.* Dreadful. I could do better with both hands tied behind my back." He glared at me. "Sentimental bourgeois garbage."

5. We set him to work making monsters. His *Death's Head* was a bronze casting not of a skull but of a petrified head reduced to its minimum. The eye sockets gaped emptily. The nose was a decayed hole in the center of a ruined face. Pitted and corroded, lipless, the smile was not menacing but matter-of-fact. Memento mori, it said. You too. To see it was to gently, even gratefully, despair.

"The boys in Psychological *will* be happy," Itawara gloated when he received it. "I wouldn't trade this for a ton of anthrax."

6. Everybody knows how strongly Picasso was influenced by American daily comic strips, by Herriman's Krazy Kat and Segal's Thimble Theater, the long nights he spent poring over Little Nemo and the Toonerville Trolley. Most, however, are ignorant of his own, ill-starred stab at the medium. But if you could find a copy of the July 17, 1938 issue of *Le Journal* (one sold at auction recently for slightly less than a thousand dollars), you would see the first installment of his short-lived and even by today's standards alarming strip.

He called it *Guernica.*

7. Flayed, the aliens showed their true faces. Without the protective mask of flesh, an evil leer floated to the surface. Dumping the heads upside down on the breakfast table changed nothing. Piled sideways in short pyramids of three, their malign intent yet showed. I drank my juice and coffee, ignored the eggs, and glowered at them. They were mocking me. They were mocking me still!

Not that this bothered Picasso. "Clear your plate," he joked. "No dessert for you until it's licked clean." He spread his hands expansively. *"Tout finis!"*

I could have killed the bastard.

8. Thermopylae was a bitch. The night before the battle the wind came straight down off of Ossa, as cold as Persephone's left tit. I hunkered down by the fire and said, "So what's the problem, hoplite?"

"This fucker just came through the fucking Portal, and we can't make fucking heads or fucking tails of it," Lycurgus said. "Sir."

It was one of Pablo's collages—a pain in the butt to explain, but that's why I get the big bucks. "This is what they call your basic coded message." I pointed. "Now that thing there is a guitar."

"If you say so, sir."

"I do. The neck tilts toward the two o'clock position. That's when we can expect the attack. The wallpaper means we can expect more troops

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coming at us than Intelligence can count. That word stenciled in the corner, 'Valse,' means waltz, which is their roundabout way of saying they expect us to dance away with the victory. The rest is just semiotic noise, in case the enemy intercepts it. Nothing here we didn't already know, but the boys Upline have got to prove to themselves that they're on top of things. Any questions?"

"Just one, sir." Lycurgus leaned a hand against a missile launcher. In this cold it must've stung like hell, but those Spartan conscripts were tough. "What do we do with this fucker now?"

"Break it up and throw it on the fire," I said. "Every little bit helps."

9. Here's the problem: A well-to-do art fancier sent Picasso an old skull he had bought from a disreputable dealer in antiquities and recognized as archaic enough to interest the Master. Who was indeed intrigued and slapped a layer of clay atop it. He worked in some sand to roughen the surface, and sent the thing through the kiln several times to acquire a set of overlaid glazes. The result is an *objet* which the critics all agree is far from his best. Even Homer nods. Yet under the distorting layer of ceramic enough of the skull's features show to indicate that it is a hominid, in exasperatingly fine condition, and of previously unidentified genus.

10. How many minotaurs died in that air-conditioned casa above the Aegean? Dozens? Thousands? We'll never know. Pablo didn't give a damn about ecological balances. He had hunters in the hills to trap the creatures and a troop of young warriors eager to face them with shield and spear.

Daytimes he painted while triremes and biremes sailed by on their way to a spot of city-burning and pillage. Evenings there was music, and often enough a brace or two of nymphs to go with the coarse local wine. And, of course, the fights.

He was sentimental beyond belief about these fights. It was a sight, this pot-bellied old man in loose white shorts waddling out onto the arena floor to slit the wounded creature's throat. Weeping for the fallen monster. He always wept.

11. We put the wires to Picasso and made him hop. Using machinery millennia beyond anything available in his primitive age, we flooded him with visions, hoodoo, hallucinations, insight, madness. We fractured his perception, shattered his faith in causality, split him off from consensus reality, and convinced him that the only still spot in a chaotic universe would have to be generated internally. The project was a roaring success.

We are currently in the process of obtaining funding to apply these techniques to the population at large. ●

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Tony Daniel

GOD'S FOOT

Tor books has just released Tony Daniel's first novel, *Warpath*. The book is set in the same milieu as his stunning June 1991 cover story, "Candle."

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When the little single engine plane landed me on the Munford airstrip, I knew I had finally entered the mysterious West. With mountaineering, until the very last moment—the snap of the empty carabiner, the whip of unanchored rope—there remains the possibility of success, I thought, the chance to get it right. As we taxied to a halt, I gazed southwest at the highest mountain in the world. The Mountain of the Hallowed Snow. Mountain of my troubled dreams. My chance to get it right.

Hallowed Snow is merely the Indo-Asian name, of course. It is known in English as *Cheaha*, and this is what the natives invariably call it. The meaning of the word is obscure, but it is sometimes translated as "God's Foot."

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I consciously broke my reverie—later, there would be much time for *Cheaha* later—and looked over the village of Munford, a motley collection of stone huts and unpaved walkways, the inhabitants lethargically rocking in their odd chairs upon the roofs, or herding cattle through the main thoroughfares at the pace of flowing honey. I reflected that those who lived among the folded skirt of the Mountain were shaped and conditioned by its demands into an alien people, and I was, for all intents and purposes, among another species. I had, however, studied their customs and believed I was prepared. Yet as I debarked from the plane, a weathered old App man approached me and extended his hand and for a moment, I panicked. I wanted to climb back through the familiar doorway and have the pilot return me to the East, to a place where I knew the customs viscerally and did not have to think every time I acted. Back to a place where the gods were not said to walk the Earth. But instead, I remembered to extend my own right hand, and take the gnarly man's in mine.

"How you doing, Mr. Li?" he said. His command of Indo-Asian was quite good. "I am Franklin Boggs."

"I'm doing okay, Mr. Boggs," I replied, in halting English. Boggs smiled.

"You just call me Frank." He said, also in English, then switched back to Indo. "I am the Greentrek representative in Munford. I will see to your needs until you leave for the Mountain."

I thanked him, and allowed him to shoulder my pack—which he did without the slightest strain. I had heard that Greentrek was paying some of the natives a salary, and not handling them as contract labor, but it was startling to hear him speak as if he were a normal corporate employee. I must admit that I was a bit shocked, despite the fact that I consider myself an enlightened man.

As we walked through the village, I noticed a few other trekkers and tourists. We were, most of us, taller than the natives. And all of us wore silk of one kind or another, even though at such an altitude as this, silk served more as ornament than functional outer clothing. The Apps all wore the hard denim pants for which they are famous.

We entered one of the larger stone huts. Occupying the first floor was a bar. Tables were made of crude wood, and every table had several chairs around it, also crudely built. Fortunately, I thought, only in Munford would I be forced to sit upon a throne to eat my dinner. It was ironic that after I trekked *farther* West, to the Mountain, I could return to civilized ways and eat on the ground. Boggs took my pack upstairs, where he'd reserved me a room. I sat at one of the tables and looked around.

There were a couple of other trekkers on the other side of the room,

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deeply engaged in conversation with one another. A woman stood behind the bar, wiping a stoneware cup.

"Be with in a moment," she said in broken Indo.

"Take your time," I replied in English. "It just feels good to finally be here."

Above the bar was a wooden sign listing prices. So. I was finally going to get a taste of corn mash whiskey, after reading about it so often. Across the bottom of the sign was the traditional blessing: "John Deer protect this house and all in it."

John Deer. One of the Mountain people's Mountain gods. The woman came over, and I ordered whiskey and crackers.

I spent the night on a futon that Greentrek had thoughtfully flown in. Despite being tired from the long day and the great altitude, I had trouble sleeping. Actually, I dreaded the prospect. Until the dreams began, sleep had always been my last retreat, where no one could harm me or, worse, slight me—or if they did, I would not know about it. Even a lover, I thought.

During our last days together, my lover for two years, Rie Fugimoto, had asked me why I read and slept so much. After it became clear to her that I was not going to advance any farther in the corporation, and why, Rie's tenderness had turned to pity, and her minor dissatisfactions to deep disappointment. Rie was essentially a good-hearted person, but there is an unmistakable look in the eye and tone to the voice that cuts as deeply as harsh words or hurtful actions. And sex. With sex, you *know* when you have fallen in a person's esteem. Here in Munford, I was no one's social inferior. After a life of twisting and turning socially, I liked the feeling of not fitting in *at all.*

Eventually I drifted off, and, as I had feared while awake, the dreams came. The dreams that had troubled my sleep for two months.

Kaleidoscope of blues, greens, grays, and whites. The blurred edges of mountains that undulated like great, breathing hulks. And me. A speck. Running up a mountain that rose, and rose, and *rose*—until it was the highest mountain of all, *Cheaha.* Confused longing and fear. I wanted to summit so badly, yet I was afraid. Something on the mountain filled me with dread. A wild smell. I turn. Something horrible. Something that *wants* me. I run, but it is no use. Hot breath at my back. Claws bringing me down, as if I were an antelope, and I'm rolling. Snow, ice, water. Darkness. I am within a shadow. I look up and see—

John Deer. Giant deer-man, looming over me. *This is your home,* a voice says. A voice that sets my spirit humming like a plucked harp string. *Come home.* My fear and longing coalesce into an impossible emotion, impossible to feel and still live, and my heart bursts, my head cracks. Falling. Falling—

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into whiteness.

And I awoke. It was just before dawn. I lay in bed until I heard people moving about downstairs, then I descended for breakfast. Breakfast was a piece of fried meat and the ground cornmeal called *grits*. The woman, whose name was Sarah, noticed that I frowned upon first tasting the *grits*, and she showed me how to lather them with butter and salt. They were no longer tasteless, but unfortunately the only tastes I could detect were butter and salt. Better get used to it, I thought, and forced down the remainder.

"Whiskey," I said, after finishing the *grits* off.

"At six in the morning? That's a mite early for a man to go to the liquor."

The person who spoke was taller than the average App. He seemed startled when I turned and smiled at him.

"Mr. Li speaks pretty good English," Sarah told the man.

"Hell, better watch my mouth then." He sat down at my table. "Gabe Spenser," he said. I thought for a moment that he was reaching for my food, but then I remembered the handshaking custom. I took his hand, and he shook mine much harder than Frank Boggs had. He had big, rough hands, and it almost hurt.

"Tetsu Li."

"Korean? But where's Tetsu from?"

Such a blunt question would be acutely embarrassing anywhere else, but I think I handled it well. "I'm from Japan, but my family is old Korean," I said—cheerfully even.

"So you know what it's like, eh?"

"Know what *what* is like?"

"Being a second-class citizen."

This *was* embarrassing to me, and I suspected that Spenser knew it.

"My family has done quite well over the years. We have porcelain interests. Despite the prejudice, we are quite comfortable. Where are you from, Mr. Spenser?"

"Call me Gabe. Did Boggs mention that I'm your guide?"

I nodded, forgetting that this meant yes, unconditionally, to the Apps. Gabe seemed to take my meaning, however.

"Well, I'm from up the road a ways. Chinnabee Creek. But I've been other places. The University of Kyoto, for instance."

Great, I thought. A Japanese-educated App. You fly around the world to experience a different culture, and it's more of the same.

"I flunked out," Spenser said. "Couldn't take the religion courses. The All is me and I am the All—that kind of shit."

"I told you to watch your mouth, Gabriel Spenser," Sarah called out from the bar.

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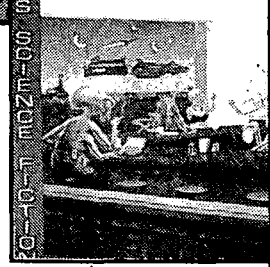

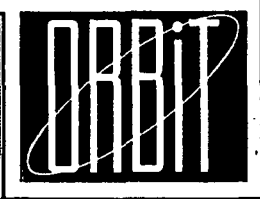

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Spenser raised his eyebrows in mock dismay. "I'm afraid I'm a confirmed polytheist at heart. My upbringing, you know."

"What *is* the customary drink for breakfast, Gabe?"

"*Coffee.*" He turned toward the bar. "Two cups of *coffee*, Sarah. And bring Mr. Li some more *grits*. He's done wolfed these clean down."

We set out later that morning for the Talladega glacier. We carried our packs, ice axes, and rope—and the oxygen bottles that we would need at altitude. Spenser hiked at a brisk pace, and I had difficulty matching him, despite the intensive training I'd undergone at the Kuril Outdoor Leadership Academy. Four weeks of strenuous exercise could not make up for my lifetime of sedentary existence in Tokyo and Osaka. I had the feeling Spenser had typecast me as the standard Eastern corporation man, seeking an exotic experience to add to his résumé, and was pushing me to the limits of my abilities as a kind of wry comment on my presumed pretensions.

And he was right, in a way, of course. There was no denying that I was the product of exactly such a system. But I was not taking time off, and I certainly had no intention of gaining "life experience" to make myself a better manager. Instead, two months before, I had dropped out of the rat race entirely, responding to the series of dreams I'd been having. Almost unheard of, I know. But after a childhood of taunts, an adolescence alone, reading, trying to prove myself worthy of a respect that I would never receive, I had had enough. I was not angry. I just wanted to retain my sanity, perhaps find a portion of meaning or even love for my life. And then the dreams began. So there it was—and here I was. *Cheaha.* Whatever else the mountain might represent, it was wholly new to me. A new chance. Perhaps I could make something of it.

After a while, I grew accustomed to the pace, and the cold Appalachian air. Even in late spring, it settled into one's lungs completely and inertly, as if one were breathing chilled nitrogen.

"So, you believe in the old gods, Mr. Spenser?" I said, coming up next to my guide. At my words, he started, as if he'd been lost in his own thoughts and had forgotten I was here.

"Depends on what you mean by 'believe,' " he said, not in the least slowing down to make the answer.

"Colonel Hank Snow. Girl Pinetucky. John Deer."

"Is that what you came here for?" Spenser asked.

"I came to climb the Kurasawa route up *Cheaha.*"

"Good." He pointed up the valley's incline, to the right. There were piles of stones silhouetted against the slate-blue sky. "Those are cairns commemorating them that took their minds off the climbing. You see

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nearly a hundred of them up and down this trail. Every move you make should be a climbing move."

This was precisely the kind of thinking that I'd flown six thousand miles to get away from. "Every step toward a goal is a part of that goal." "Any given moment is just as important as any other." After years of meaningless moments, such a philosophy can drive one to despair. It had done so to me.

"My climbing skills are adequate, and the Kurasawa route is a walk up a safe glacier," I replied. I could not keep the petulance from my voice, and my tone seemed to surprise Spenser.

"There's no such thing as a safe glacier. Even the Talladega has crevasses," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "You know what I mean."

"Yes."

We walked silently for a couple of hours, until we reached the "village" of Lickskillet. Before the trekkers had begun to pour in from the East, Lickskillet had been nothing more than a collection of stone huts, a waystation for summer herders. Now it boasted a bar and two hostels. Both of these seemed out of place, and seedy, however—not at all like Sarah's homey bar in Munford. Nevertheless, Spenser led me inside for his Greentrek-provided shot of noontime whiskey. I contented myself with hot tea this time, and we shared a plate of pork chops and black-eyed peas for lunch. The cooking was indifferent, and I feared the possibility of trichina infestation, though I said nothing. Spenser didn't seem to like the food any more than I, though it was a free meal for him, but he finished every last bite.

We continued on, and, by twilight, we were on the Talladega Glacier. The great U-shaped valley rose on either side of us. We climbed the moraine to the south, and set up camp on the other side. There was tundra greenery and a delightful little stream meandering through it. Far in the distance rose Cold Water Mountain, the Earth's fourth highest peak.

I was quickly discovering that climbing *Cheaha* was a succession of meals punctuated by walking, or vice versa. Spenser cooked up a particularly fine one this evening on our little gas stove. It was a stir-fry combining wonderful Tennessee sausage with freeze dried vegetables that were instantly marinated by a sauce that would rival that of the finest chefs in Tokyo.

"I *do* like good eating," Spenser replied, when I complimented him on his skill.

Since the night was clear, we decided to forgo the tent and sleep only in our bivouac bag-covers. Night fell, and the stars seemed to throw down spears of light. At this altitude, nearly twenty thousand feet, they did not twinkle.

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"Moon'll be up around midnight," Spenser said. His voice seemed to emerge from the darkness, as if he were speaking from a long way off. "She's not quite full yet."

I snuggled up in my down sleeping bag. "Full moon is supposed to be John Deer's time," I said.

Spenser didn't reply for a long time, then he sighed. "What are you up to, Li? Come to Alabama to get some of that Western folk wisdom? Going to find you an old Preacherman and get Girl Pinetucky's secret buttermilk biscuit recipe?"

"I'd come to *you* for that, Gabe, the way you cook."

Spenser chuckled. His bivy bag rustled as he settled down to rest. After a while, the moon rose, and I drifted off to a sleep like soft, quiet snow. No dreams this night.

I awoke before dawn. The moon had traversed to the northwest, and was setting behind the moraine's top. And there was a tall man rimmed in its light. He had on a plaid shirt and blue jeans.

He had an antler rack upon his head, and the face of a deer.

I must have gasped, or made some sort of noise, for I heard Spenser rustle to wakefulness nearby. He said nothing.

The deer-headed man raised his hands toward the moon in what I took to be a worshipful pose. His limbs were long and graceful, muscled and sinewy. For a moment, I was sure I was dreaming again, even if this one were logical and clear. Then, the deer-headed man bolted. Very unlike a human being. Very like a deer. He bolted over the moraine, over to the glacier side. His knees seemed to bend in the wrong direction. I struggled from my sleeping bag, and ran to look down upon the Talladega. Nothing. Dirty ice. Rubble.

But then, far up the glacier—much farther than was possible even for a man running at full speed—I saw a spot of grayness, moving as if on four legs. Climbing, climbing.

"What's this about, Li?" Spenser was standing beside me. I hadn't even heard him come up. "Old John's never shown himself to one of my *trekkers* before."

"Dreams," I whispered. "Dreams of death." I hoped that the last word was lost in the morning breeze. But Spenser heard it.

"So. You gonna throw yourself from Cheaha, are you? John Deer smells some sacrificial offering meat?"

"I don't know."

"Well, let me tell you this: he didn't come to give you *hope*, if that's what you're thinking. He doesn't work that way."

Spenser had no idea of what I was feeling, I reflected. Perhaps the Apps really were an inferior race, incapable of understanding more subtle emotions than simple fear and physical longing. But that was precisely the kind of thinking that had caused the Japanese children to

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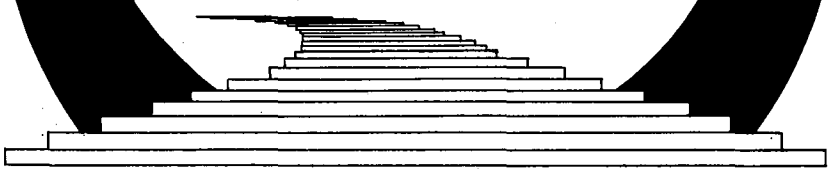

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treat *me* so badly when I was young. It was the thinking that created a glass ceiling for Koreans in the corporations, and had dogged my family for generations.

I am far, far beyond all that now, I thought, calming myself. I am in the Appalachians, less than three hundred miles from the Atlantic Sea, and the mysterious far West. Six hundred miles from mystic Europe, where many of the nomadic herders were said to have never even heard of Japan!

Gabe Spenser is descended from the vanished English race, who crossed the sea and penetrated the gorges that bisect the Appalachians. Gabe Spenser is a good cook and a good guide.

I saw John Deer.

I saw a *god*, walking the Earth. Before, I'd only seen him in my dreams. Forget the corporation; forget the outcome of the dreams. "Have you ever seen him before, Gabe? Will he return?"

Spenser gazed up the glacier. In the clear morning, Cheaha's stratospheric pennant plumed out like a long, white prayer flag. "He's up here," was all he said. Then he climbed down the moraine and started breakfast.

After *grits* and *coffee*, we packed up and started climbing once again. Soon the glacier was rising up at nearly twenty-five degrees. We got out our ice axes and roped ourselves together for crevasse rescue. The idea was, if one of us fell in a hidden crevasse, the other would dive to the ground and self-arrest. The first person would then use climbing devices called ascenders to pull himself up the rope and out of the crevasse. Fine for theory, but stopping the falling weight of another man by digging into the snow and ice was problematic at best. Always better not to fall into a crevasse in the first place.

We skirted a couple of big gaping ones. Spenser was right; even the calmest of glaciers had crevasses. The Talladega was a geographic anomaly, cutting through fine sediment laid down by an ancestral sea long before the Euroasian and African plates decided to slam into North America, back in the late Cretaceous. At 30,012 feet, geologists claimed that the Appalachians were still rising from the collision. Like rivers develop rapids when they flow over rocks, most glaciers, flowing from such a height, formed giant, dangerous icefalls during their descents. But the Talladega had no hidden rocks, no nunataks, no hard obstructions beneath it at all. As Kurasawa and Tanimoto discovered fifty years before, climbing *Cheaha* was nothing more or less than an incredibly taxing slog—and *they* did it without oxygen. Other than breathing and climbing, there were no technical difficulties involved.

"Do you think he resents us being up here?" I asked, when we paused for a water break. I didn't have to tell Spenser whom I meant by "he."

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"No App climbed Cheaha before the Japanese came. It was sacred." Spenser took a long swig from his water bottle.

"Yet *you* climb."

"The world has changed."

"Not that much, apparently."

He handed me the bottle and I drank after him. This would have been unthinkable behavior in Japan.

"John Deer isn't the same," Spenser said. "Maybe not for the better. App gods ain't like your Asian Absolute. There ain't no yin and yang to them. John Deer's part of the world, and he's changed along with it."

"What makes you so sure of that?" I replied. "Maybe he is part of what was lost. Maybe we can get it back."

"We?"

"Us *folks*." I used the word in English that meant the same thing as "App."

"And you're *folks*, are you?"

"Are you?"

We climbed on into the afternoon. Spenser called a halt at what he said was the last tuft of tundra grass on the route. It grew in a little glade-sized patch just over the glacier's southern moraine. We were just below 25,000 feet. Though I'd been resisting it, tomorrow I'd have to go onto oxygen.

The day grew extremely cold as the sun set, and I put on my down coveralls. Spenser did not seem to be affected by the chill.

We decided to set up the tent for this night, and just after Spenser got it staked down, the wind came howling from southwest, up the Talladega. There was no way to keep the stove going outside, so we retreated inside, and cooked a small meal. Spenser was an expert, even under trying conditions, and soon had a very nice repast prepared. As we ate, the wind turned to a blizzard outside, and snow began to pile up around the tent in drifts. I felt a slight apprehension that we would be buried. Spenser seemed to read this from my face.

"Good insulation for the night," he said. "It's going to be a bit on the cold side, I'm afraid."

The night was almost unbearable, even with my expedition-weight down sleeping bag. I did not sleep. And when the sun came up, things had not improved very much. Even Spenser was affected. He lit the stove while staying mostly in his bag. The wind kept up, and there was no question of going out, so Spenser took a long, careful time preparing a marvelous breakfast, which we ate at our leisure. But for the nagging worry that the climb was over or—worse yet—that we might be trapped right where we were with no way to go either up or down, the morning would have been very pleasant, despite the cold. In fact the chill, along

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with the diffuse light (which had to seep through both snow and nylon), created a dawnlike effect in the tent, as if our lazy progress through the morning did not matter, since time was standing still, and we were always just waking up. Perhaps this was more my impression than Spenser's, since I had spent the better part of my life jumping from my sleep roll in the morning to the sound of a buzzing clock.

Finally, toward noon, the wind let up somewhat, and we attempted to go out. There was a strange feel to the air, almost an electricity. I followed Spenser out, and we both put our backs to the wind and took long, necessary urinations. The air was so cold that I was truly concerned about frostbite setting in during the process. What a horrible place to become gangrenous! But these thoughts were dashed from my mind when Spenser let out a huff behind me.

"He's been here, goddamnit!" he said. "Look at his tracks, everywhere."

There were, indeed, the split hoofed markings of deer all around the tent. Spenser seemed discombobulated. Much more so than the storm or the cold had made him.

"What does he want?" He was speaking to himself. Then to me. "I think you'd better level with me."

"All right," I said. I pulled my pack out of the tent, and sat down on it. The wind was strong, but not fierce. It actually felt good, after the closeness of the tent. "About two months ago, I was working for the Katahara Corporation as the Sub-manager of Sequential Tasks at their plant in Osaka."

Spenser rolled his eyes at my job description. I ignored him and continued.

"I decided when I was a young man that I would not stay in the family business, but that I would venture into mainstream society and make a life for myself there on my own merits. My grades were good in school, and my test scores were exceptional. But I discovered that my parents had been right: my ethnic background was a lead weight around my aspirations. Sub-manager in a spur plant was as well as a Korean was ever going to do—would ever be *allowed* to do. While I was considering the hard reality of the situation, I began to experience a series of dreams. They were dreams of *Cheaha*."

At this, Spenser grunted. He, too, sat down on his pack, listening intently now.

"The mountain was real—as real as it is here, today. But the circumstances of the dreams were confused, blurred, as if several events were happening at once—similar events, but differing to one degree or another. But all of them had the same outcome: a brief glimpse of a deer-headed man, and then a wall of whiteness descended upon me—or whoever the *me* was who was perceiving in the dreams—and engulfed my

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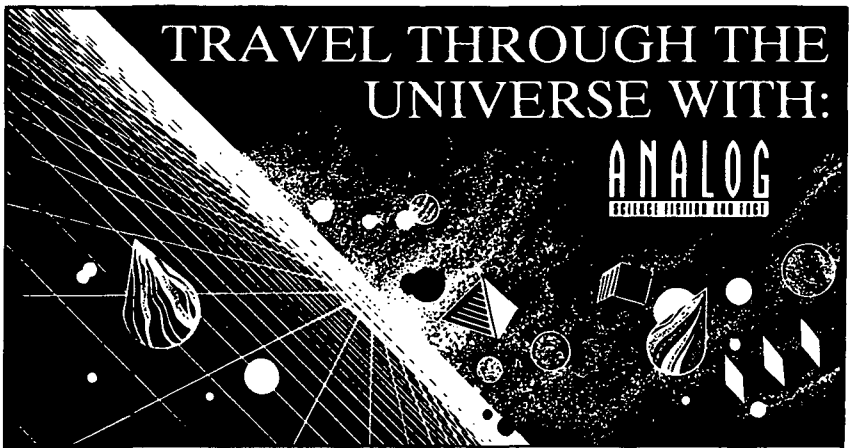

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consciousness. At the time, considering my disappointed condition, I interpreted this whiteness as my own death. But now that I have seen John Deer, I am not so sure. Perhaps it is some sort of transcendence."

"Transcendence?" Spenser said, "Sounds more like an avalanche." He got up and walked around with agitation. "I think we'd better go back down," he finally said.

"Why?" I asked. "Do you know what these dreams were about? I quit my job, left my place in life, to follow where I thought they were leading me. Can you help me?"

Spenser shook his head slowly, perhaps sadly. "I'm not sure anybody can help you, now," he replied.

"Please tell me, Gabe. What do you know?"

Spenser reached into the tent, grabbed his sleeping bag, and began stuffing it into its compartment within his pack. I moved to do the same. So we were packing up and moving out, despite the wind. Spenser must really believe there was some danger.

"Do you know what a Preacherman is?" Spenser asked, still stuffing his bag.

"The Apps' shaman or priest, right? He is said to heal the sick and communicate with the spirits of the land."

"Yeah, well, *I* used to be one. Before I took the notion to travel, see what the rest of the world believed in."

"So you are an apostate."

"No. I'm just not a Preacherman anymore. You don't have to *like* the gods you believe in."

"Why don't you like John Deer?"

"I didn't say that."

"But—"

"Nobody knows John Deer," Spenser said, lowly, his voice becoming almost a chant. "I told you, the gods of the West are not like your Buddha or Shinto deities. They're folks, that's all. A man has courage, he does something brave, but he tells you he was scared as hell all the time he was doing it. He's a hero, but he's still just a man. Maybe a bad man. These gods are like that."

"Then where do they get their power? Is it from the God behind all gods, the Absolute?"

"That's Kyoto bullshit."

"It may be true. Why not?"

"John Deer. Girl Pinetucky. They don't give a damn about balance. They ain't no universal principles, that kind of thing."

He had stuffed his bag almost all the way into his pack. Only the top end stuck out. Spenser paused, pulled a little more back out. "The

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mountain gods are like this," he said. "Feelers. Tentacles. All they care about is eating and protecting themselves."

"Pseudopods?"

"That's right. The main part of God stays buried. Waiting."

"For what?"

"I don't know." He stuffed the bag in violently. "Gentleman adventurers from the East, I suppose."

"So I have been *lured* here as a kind of . . . fodder?"

Before Spenser could answer, a mighty gust of wind blew through our camp and tore the tent from his hands. It lofted upward, like a kite. "Goddamnit!" Spenser yelled, and we ran after it. But there was no catching the thing. It spiraled up and then away, over a horn of rock, and out of sight to the south.

"There's an ice cliff over there," Spenser said sullenly. "It'll fall three thousand feet before it settles."

We returned to our packs and secured the rest of the equipment. There was now no alternative but descent. Nights higher up would be deadly without protection from the weather.

We crossed the moraine and descended onto the glacier. Spenser took off his pack, and knelt to get out the rope. I began to shiver, so I unzipped a side pocket of my pack and pulled out a pile jacket. When I looked up from my task, John Deer was standing down-glacier, not ten feet away.

In the misty sunlight, he was less fay than he'd appeared at night, more imposing, like a stag who is securely in his territory. His antler rack had at least twelve points, and the spring velvet covered large portions of it, with only the horn tips sticking out like the sheathed stings of hornets. His face, a deer's in every regard, was expressionless. Utterly unfathomable.

"I want this one, Colonel," John Deer said. His voice resounded, as if his vocal cords were metallic. It blared low and clear, like a modulating trombone. "You can't take him down."

Spenser started. I heard him gasp. His back was to me and I could not see the expression on his face. He stood up slowly, turned deliberately.

"Haven't talked with you for a while, John."

"I want this one," said the god.

Spenser leaned on his ice ax. "Now what in the world use is a damned Japanese tourist? They're a dime a dozen."

"I want *this* one. You go on down."

"Mr. Deer," I stammered, "Sir—"

"Quiet!"

I shut up. I felt frightened tears welling in my eyes. They ran down my face and pooled at the bottom of my sunglasses. When had I put on

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my sunglasses? I wondered. I couldn't remember, couldn't think. John Deer. Wants *me*.

"He doesn't know anything about this," Spenser said. "This is between you and me."

"No. That's over," said John Deer. "You wouldn't."

"I'll do it now. Let him go."

"Too late," the god replied. He took a step forward. "You knew we would call somebody else. You knew this day would come."

Spenser stood up straighter. He pulled his ice ax out of the snow. "That's why I hung around the mountain, John."

"You can't stop us, Colonel."

Suddenly, my brain engaged. *Colonel.* Colonel Hank Snow, the App god of the hearth, cooking. Protector of travelers and the destitute. Dancer in high places.

"I ain't the Colonel," Spenser said. "I gave that back."

John Deer ignored Spenser, and turned his head sideways, one eye looking straight at me. A cloud passed over the sun, and the prismatic animal reflection flashed in his retina. Not human. *Nobody knows John Deer.*

"He will do. He hates the East. I can see it in his heart."

"He doesn't know what he feels," Spenser said, loudly. I could not look at him, could not tear my eyes away from John Deer. "You're the one who'd make it into hate."

"You go on down, Colonel."

"No."

Clink of ax. Muffled step in snow.

John Deer released me from his gaze. I stumbled back, as if I'd been physically pushed. The god advanced on Spenser, lowered his rack.

"Run, Li!" said Spenser.

I could not summon the willpower. John Deer charged Gabe Spenser. Spenser nimbly jumped out of the way, and brought his ax around in a wide arc, clattering into the antlers. He yanked on the ax, and the god spun around, bellowing.

Spenser held on bravely, but the effort was too much. He made a quick twist with his wrist and disengaged the ax. The god stumbled back momentarily, then with quick deer-steps regained his footing.

"*Run*, goddamnit!" Spenser called to me.

He took a swing at the god, but John Deer jumped into the air with fleet grace, and the ax passed under his hoofed paws. Again he advanced on Spenser.

What finally broke me from my fascinated trance was the look in Gabe Spenser's eyes as the god came toward him. *Spenser* was the frightened animal. It was a look of pure terror.

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I spun on my heels and began plunge-stepping down the Talladega as fast as I could. There was a great clanking and bellowing behind me, but I did not look back. I covered quite a distance before my foot hit a chunk of ice just under the snowy glacier surface, and I tumbled into a fall.

Snow everywhere. Breath knocked from my lungs. Snow down my back, under my glasses, in my eyes. Then I hit something hard, and I was airborne. I am going to fly away, I thought, I am falling upward into the gray sky. Outer space. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.

Slam. A sharp pain in my leg, but far away, far away. I looked down.

I'd come to rest amidst a pile of surface gravel. My ax, which I'd somehow kept hold of during the fall, had speared through my gaiters and pants—into my calf muscle. My feet were still on the glacier, and red blood welled out onto the white snow. This was not me. I was still flying upward. Upward.

Far, far above me, was the figure of John Deer. His arms were raised, and in them he held the slumped body of a man. As I watched, he jammed his rack into the man's side, again and again. The man's arms were flailing. I could just make out the distant cry of pain. Yet, as I watched, the man seemed to be expanding, bloating, as if death were accelerated and he was experiencing rigor mortis and maggots at the same time as the pain of death. Oh, Gabe, I thought. *Oh, Gabe.*

Panic inside me. White nothingness. Or white *everything*, all at once, burning in me, burning through me. I yanked the ax from my leg and somehow got to my feet. I began scrambling down the glacier once again.

Each step was an agony. My breath billowed out in great ragged puffs. I heard a snort, and was sure it was the god, closing in behind me. I could not help myself. I looked back.

John Deer was casting the man's body away. Even from this great distance, I could see the animal glint of his eye.

The dreams, I thought. *This is the end of all my dreams.*

I did not see the crevasse. I was too busy looking over my shoulder. I fell in without a sound.

Whiteness. The blank, inhuman stare of eternity. Spirit of the East. It grew narrower as I fell, and I lodged between the constricting sides of the crevasse. I stayed there, shivering for a while, then my shivering stopped. I did not care. The West, the East—I did not care which was right, or if neither were. All that was over for me. Belief did not matter. Nobody and nothing cared if I believed. Whiteness permeated, took me, washed my body clean, blurred my mind to a point, a rock on a glacier, a spot in a vast field. Of whiteness.

Scuffling and pawing above. A bellow of frustration. I did not care. All was white. I was still. A dark shadow passed over me, over the crevasse. The fading beat of hooves. White silence, for a long time.

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"Li."

My eyes were snow crystals. My mouth was sealed like a snow-choked crevasse.

"Li, you have to get out. You can't die here. They'll get your body, son, get your mind half-gone. Make you a snow wraith."

"I can't—"

"Tetsu, you damned no-good Korean, move your ass!"

Somewhere, in a past life, this angered me. I tried to turn. My body did not move. "Nothing."

"Tetsu Li, you come out of that hole."

Hands beneath me. Mine. My ax in my fingers. Arm stretching up. Something grabbed the ax.

"Gabe?"

Something pulled up on the ax. I held on. Somehow. When my head cleared the lip of the crevasse, I found some strength, and started to claw my way out.

"Gabe Spenser's dead. But he still had a little bit of the Colonel in him, even though he renounced the old fellow."

I pulled myself over the lip of the crevasse. The sunlight dazzled me. The clouds had gone away. Hands reached down, gently put my sunglasses over my eyes. Then they touched me.

Warmth. Log fires. Whiskey. *Grits*, even. My leg stopped hurting.

"John's lost your scent, Li, but he'll find it again, soon enough, now that your brain's thinking."

I looked up, into Spenser's face. But it was *not* his face, also. Faint. You could see the mountain *through* its outlines. And something older, less human within them. But still, somehow, kind. Not an animal, either. A good spirit.

"I'm—" I swallowed. No saliva. I swallowed again, and there was some wetness. "I'm afraid."

"I know," said the Colonel. "I know about that."

He stood up tall. Taller than Spenser ever could have, as if Spenser's being were *stretched out*. He looked around, seemed to come to a decision. "Ah, hell. I'm dead anyway."

He helped me to my feet. Or perhaps he willed me to stand up, and I was able to do so on my own.

"Li, you say you don't fit in here. Well, I'm going to send you *someplace else*."

"Someplace else?"

"I'm a god, Tetsu. At least I used to be. There is a place where we're all connected, sort of. You people eat octopus. Think of me as an octopus with my tentacles in different worlds, but every tentacle is a complete being in and of itself.

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"God's pseudopods."

"That's right. Well, I can take you from one world to another. To a world they'd never think of looking for you in. But I'll have to be the gateway myself, and it'll kill me to do it."

"Why . . . why me? Why do I have to run to another world?" I had no idea what "another world" might be. I was stunned and blathering. The Colonel seemed to take it in stride.

"*They're* afraid, the fools."

"Who?"

"John Deer, all of them. It's the old story. Gods eat worship. Since you Japanese started coming, the foods supply's getting leaner. So they wanted a weapon. That's why they sent me over the broad Pacific, to the East. But it got me unhinged. I saw the futility. Gabe, he was right ornery when he got an idea."

"They called me to be a god?"

"That's right, son. They want to use you against all the new ideas from the East. Be a god for the trekkers. Maybe spread App ways back East, take over the world." The Colonel laughed bitterly, rubbed his side. It was seeping something greenish—something that definitely wasn't blood.

"What's . . . what's so wrong about that?"

"Trust me, son. Being a god ain't all it's cracked up to be. Your human nature sours you, makes you mean. Mostly you end up hurting people to get your way, or you exploit poor folks' weaknesses."

I barely heard these last words. I was tired, tired of running. Tired of thinking. I looked back to the crevasse. I could just fall back in. Make it be over.

"Okay, Li. Time to go." The Colonel raised his arms to the sky. Thunder rumbled, or maybe distant avalanches. "It is a sweet life, here in the mountains," he said. "I'm going to miss it."

He gazed around. And there was Spenser in his face, back for a moment—and the Colonel, too. Human, divine. Crackle. White fire.

Then green. Green all around me. Warmth from the sun.

"What in the *world*—"

A woman stood by a concrete picnic table. She was Western; there was English in her. She was cooking something at a propane stove. Three children sat at the picnic table benches, staring at me, dumbfounded. They were all *Apps*.

"Honey, who *is* that?"

I turned. A man, standing beside a car. An App with an automobile! Incredible. Blinding light gleaming from its hood. A car. In a parking lot.

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"Ain't those clothes a bit warm for Cheaha?" the woman asked. "You look like you're ready to go climb Mt. Everest!"

I gazed at her, tried to smile at the children. She looked familiar, very familiar. But tears welled in my eyes and blurred my vision. I took off my sunglasses and dabbed my eyes.

"Here now," the woman said. In English. Sarah. It was *Sarah*, who ran the bar in Munford. She handed me a tissue. "Here now, have a Kleenex. You must be lost. Can you understand me? Do you know where you are?"

And here I was, out of the whiteness, in this new place, this new life Colonel Hank Snow had given me. I felt it in the pit of my stomach, in the depths of my soul—that rush of confusion and excitement you feel just as someone pulls the rug from under your feet, when there is a strange movement in the world, you suspect no evil, and you have no idea what is going to happen next. I used the tissue to wipe my nose.

"Am I still in Alabama?" I asked, taking a stumbling step forward. One of the children giggled. "Am I near *Cheaha?*"

"Why sure," said the woman. "You're *standing* right on the very tip-*top* of it." I dropped my ice ax. It clattered on a stone pathway. I took off my wool cap.

"Why, you're Japanese!" She turned to the children. "This man is *Japanese*."

"Korean," I said. "From Japan."

"Huh? Well, anyway, sit down with us, and I'll get you a Coke."

I did as she asked, and one of the children warily made room for me. There was a strong hand on my shoulder, and I looked up into the face of a man. It was the Greentrek representative who had met me at the plane. Now he was wearing a short-sleeved polo shirt, like you might see in Polynesia.

"Mr. Boggs?"

"I don't know *you*, stranger," he replied. "But I guess you know *me*."

I took a deep breath, carefully took off my coat.

"The heat must have affected me," I said. "They don't have this kind of heat where I came from."

"Yep," said Frank Boggs. Sarah gave him a cold, bottled drink, which he handed over to me. "These Alabama summers can be real scorchers!" ●

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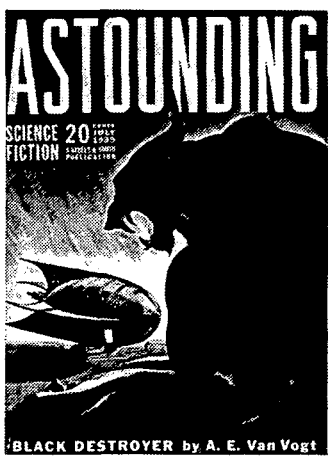

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THE LAST FLIGHT FROM LLANO

Patricia Anthony

A limited edition of Patricia Anthony's latest novel, *The Conscience of the Beagle*, will be published by First Books this summer. Another novel, *Brother Termite*, will be out from Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in October.

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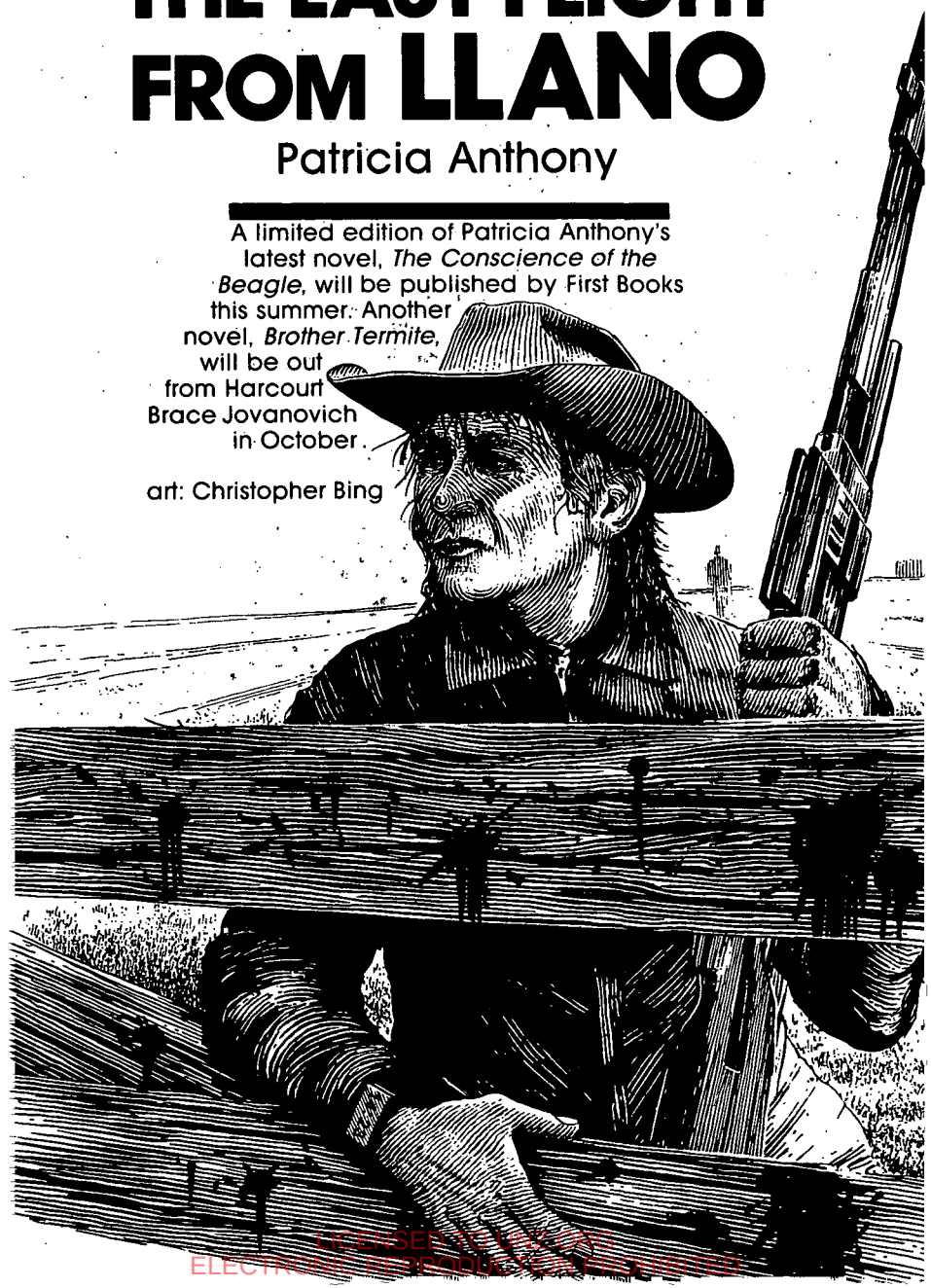

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When he was drunk enough, Pa would get a wistful grin on his face and tell me about the time Texas used to be the biggest state, like goddamned ugly acreage was something to be proud of.

When things change, some parts of it hurt and some just get funny. Houston and Galveston they tried to save, Pa tells me, even though Pa said all the people at the new capital in Dallas never seen the point. And when the state legislature finally just up and told everybody flat-out that they couldn't afford to fund the dikes, all the people in the rest of Texas just grinned and let the crabs have Houston. What with the stink from the refineries and the bad traffic, they all thought the world would be a better place without it.

But losing Corpus had been hard for Pa. When he was on his second six-pack, he'd tell me about eating fried shrimp at some fancy white-tableclothed restaurant where big glass windows looked over the bridge and the bay. Then he'd start to cry. He'd cry for Corpus, and he'd cry for the white-tailed deer, and the red oaks. Pa could get sentimental like that.

Me, I never seen when the oak trees died. All I ever seen was their ghosts standing dead in the pastures. But God, I loved documentaries about the Change. I seen that news special on the TV, showing how the Antarctic ice-cap broke into big, glistening pieces that floated off around the sea, like fruit cocktail bobbing in Jell-O.

I seen a neat documentary, too, that counted up the deaths in the U.S.: Eighteen million from starvation, and twenty million from the spotted fever that arrived later, like a horseman of the Apocalypse with a lame mount.

What happened in Llano was pretty quiet. The spotted death didn't hit the hill country, and, being farmers, we weren't going to starve overnight. By the time I hit twelve, though, being a little hungry was just part of life and I never got to see no more documentaries. The Llano River dried up, and then the Colorado became a trickle, and people started emptying out of Llano like piss out of a steer. It just wasn't worth the trouble for the electric company to maintain the wires.

The Colorado River and the electric company both went away, and left Llano to the scorpions. As soon as the dry started settling in, them black Mexican scorpions, some as big as a spread hand, started hoofing north. From the time I started to toddle to the age of eight, I got stung twice. The second time nearly killed me, which is what taught me not to go outside without my boots on and not to lay on the floor while I was reading.

I never was a fast learner.

If you was to ask me what I thought of the weather changes, I'd tell

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you, scorpions, creosote brush, and goddamned longhorn cattle. Everybody else thought about how damned hot it was. When I was growing up, though, it just seemed natural for everybody to lay down in the middle of the day in the summer and not get up until about five o'clock. When I was a kid, I didn't think much about the heat.

It was the fucking *loneliness* that got me.

The only people who stayed around Llano were T.J. Garza, who raised ostriches, and Pa, who was working on a crossbred cow that would mix the stick-to-it-iveness of the longhorn with the eatability of the Angus.

But that bull Angus never bred true, and when them longhorn cows would throw their calves, they'd be white-and-brown spotted, with nubbly horns already pushing out of each side of their slick heads so fast you'd know they'd end up with a arm's span each side.

The Angus bull was a terror, and he looked like a black box of meat with legs. Summers I had to wet him down so that he wouldn't go to fainting, like he had a habit of doing. Pa told me once that the Angus come originally from Scotland, and sometimes I'd think that was what made him so goddamned mean. His blood was longing for them misty, cold mornings. Maybe he'd dream about them or something, and then when he'd wake up and find himself in *Llano,* he'd be pissed off for a week.

But them longhorns . . . wasn't nothing could bother *them.* At breeding time, we'd bring them in, all scruffy and lean, full of piss and vinegar and blow flies and burrs. We'd wet down the Angus good and then lead him out like he was goddamned King of Scotland. Pa'd let him mount the cows in the corral, so His Majesty wouldn't have to put up with the predators, and I'd spray him down like a male dog on a bitch so he wouldn't have to worry about the heat. Then, when the longhorn cows took, we'd just let them loose out in the back forty to fend for themselves, and lead that old Angus back to his stall.

Every once in a while, we'd throw out a bale of hay or two and watch them cows come up with their new, scraggly calves, every one of them a longhorn, just like that Angus had never had no part in the breeding. I used to think that it was the desert who was their true Pa, and that as long as them cows had to forage for scrub, them calves would look stringy and hard, like they belonged to the place.

Everything soft just moved out of Texas, and when I was almost fifteen, I recall going over to T.J.'s for a ostrich-egg omelette and seeing an old *Playboy* magazine he had on the night stand. It wasn't like I passed up peeking at all them women with their privates spread. I looked at them, too. But what caught me was a picture of a woman standing in a glade greener than anything I'd ever seen. She had a dress on with the first three buttons undone, but nothing really showing. That dress was a

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material soft as smoke, and it was the color of the thunderheads that roll over from the ocean on their ways to somewheres else. Her hair was like the sun just before it dips out of sight in the west and pulls cool night up like a coverlet. God, she was beautiful!

When the two men seen me looking at the magazine, they laughed.

"Sap's rising in the boy, Duane," T.J. said. "Need to take him over to the San Saba whorehouse."

And Pa said, with a drunk's sloppy grin, "Seen anything in there you'd like to grab hold of, boy?"

Fact was, I had. I wanted to grab onto that girl in the green glade and let her take me away to someplace where the rain comes down quiet and slow, someplace empty of scorpions, a place where oak trees go to leaf.

Pa was still ribbing me when we left T.J.'s.

"I want to leave this goddamned place," I said. It was the first time I'd really known what I wanted, and maybe that's what growing up means.

"Where you want to go?" he asked me. I was pure astonished that he didn't sound mad. He sounded sort of thoughtful, actually. Maybe the thoughtfulness came from his being drunk and trying to keep the pickup on the road. "Down to Victoria and the coast?"

"I want to get the hell out of *Texas*. Want to go up north, where they have winters with snow and maybe some pine trees."

"Shoot, boy," he said in disgust, "they's *Yankees* up north." He sort of whipped his hand to the side and thumped my chest. He was joking, but the blow hurt. Pa was always hurting me and not meaning to, when he was drunk.

"Up to Michigan, it's still green," I told him, "and the summers don't come on like blowflies on shit. There ain't no goddamned black scorpions up to Michigan."

He looked at me, taking his eyes off the road for a second or so too long for comfort. The light from the dash lit his pockmarked face in green, making little moon craters of the places where the doctors had burned the cancers off. I knew he was mad then, and I knew he was scared, too, because Ma had gone off just after I was born, the same way I wanted to.

"Don't you go on about how the north's so great and about how Llano ain't no good. You never starved here. The spotted fever never come."

"Spotted fever never come," I said, " 'cause there ain't no *people* here. There ain't no people here, Pa, for the fever to fucking spread."

He didn't say nothing, but the next night he took me over to Willie's Barbecue Bar and Whorehouse, so I guess he was trying any way he could to get me to stay. Even though that whore didn't look nothing like that girl in the picture, I had her there on that sprung single bed, with us both sweating all over the bare mattress.

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From then on, every Friday night, he took me with him, paying for the beer and the whores with an occasional longhorn steer. Willie's had the toughest damned barbecue in all creation.

The food was bad, but at least it was a change from cooking. And there were good things about Willie's too. Willie, who had been a lineman, knew enough about power to keep his stolen electricity up, and he had an old television in the bar that played lots of commercials with smiling people in them, so I knew life was rolling on real happy somewheres *else*.

It was more fun watching commercials on Willie's old television set than it was fucking Willie's hard, ugly whores.

Then one day Willie started talking about how he'd like to move down to the Sierra Azul, down near where Tampico used to be, and he started getting this look on his face, this soft look that told me he didn't belong in the desert no more.

He'd talk about the cool air in the mountains and the way the bullfrogs sang after a rain. He said when he visited the mountains he found out that green wasn't just one color, but a whole *lot* of them. Near Tampico, you could find every shade of green from the chartreuse of banana trees to the blue-green leaves of coffee.

I could tell Pa was scared of that soft look in Willie's eyes. "Move down with a bunch of greasers?" Pa growled as he pushed his beer glass back and forth on its coaster of water melt. "You'll get lice. Your whores'll get crotch-rot."

Willie's softness left and a hard-scrabble despair took its place. "Used to get business from all the way down to *Austin,* but everybody who's any account's done left. Them bikers and dope heads don't bother coming up to San Saba to get their ashes hauled. Either that, or they ain't got the money. Texas is *dead.* I can read the writing on the wall, and you'd best, too."

"*Greasers,* Willie," Pa reminded him.

Three weeks later, when we come back for some beer and barbecue and whores, we found Willie's place all boarded-up; and in the street in front of the bar, Pa kicked the be-Jesus out of a trash can.

"Come on, Pa," I told him, grabbing his arm. It was dark but still hot, and the streets stank of garbage and shit.

He pulled away from me and kicked the trash can again, sending orange peels and egg shells exploding out of the top. Against the wooden wall of the bar, the can made a clap as loud and sharp as close-struck lightning.

"Shit. Shit!" Pa said. He'd drunk most of two six-packs at the house, and was at the stage dynamite gets to when it ages and starts to leak, and the least, most accidental jolt will set it off.

"Come on home," I said, standing out of fist's reach.

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When he kicked the can again, the tip of his boot punched through the rusting side, and he laughed. The can toppled, pulling him down with it. On the ground, he started to cry.

I didn't try to help him up. When Pa was in one of his bad drunks it was best to keep away from him. We stayed there like that for a long time, in the street in front of Willie's boarded-up bar, me with my hands in my pockets, waiting, and Pa crying, rolling around in dog shit.

After that, Pa started going all the way down to Austin to get beer, and he'd go without me. He'd come home two and three days later sometimes, with a bad head and a black mood, and I'd have to clean the puke off his clothes and get some food down him.

Nights alone, I'd peek out my window at the coyotes, on the hunt for field mice, rattling through the dry corn. In the day, when the air smelled of hot metal and dust, I'd go out in the bright sledgehammer sun and cool down the Angus.

Pa's drunks got worse, partly because he was mad at Willie, and partly because he was so damned scared. I begged him to come back in the evenings and not to leave me by myself. I was sixteen years old, but I was scared, too—scared of the coyotes, scared of the scorpions.

Pa always promised. "Be back this evening," he'd say. But he never would. God, he never would. It would be two, or three, or four days before I'd see him. Pa was never real good at promises.

Then, one time, he brought a woman home from Austin and kept her for about a month. All that month he was looking over his shoulder at me, as if he thought I was going to try and jump her. The woman was sick-skinny, like a coyote, and she had a coyote's hungry eyes. She wore halter tops, and I could count her ribs. She looked like something the desert had kicked out.

I never did know what he saw in her. She wasn't smart enough for company and not pretty enough for bed. I guess he finally figured that out, too, because when she started bitching about the outdoor plumbing and the fire ants, he took her back.

Pa settled down again then, except for him drinking more than he should. He held it pretty much together, though, up to the day T.J. drove a horse trailer full of ostriches over to our place to say goodbye.

"Heading out west," T.J. said. "Maybe Colorado, maybe California. When I hit the green, boys, I'm just gonna stop."

Pa, who had stopped having any sober times you could count, said, "You chicken shit," in a hissing rattlesnake voice.

The sun was high. When the wind blew, it blew hot, and it spat sand in my face. Against the metal sides of the horse trailer, the ostriches' beaks made small clattering noises that sounded like rain.

"Greaser!" Pa said. "You never *was* nothing but a greaser!"

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I felt I could have dropped through the floor. T.J. had been too good to us for Pa to have any call to say that.

T.J. didn't look angry, though. He just looked sort of sad.

"You just go *on*, then, you just . . . " All of a sudden Pa's words dried up, dry as the Llano, dry as the pastures. His mouth worked up and down as if he was going to cry. He didn't. Instead he picked up a rock and threw it at T.J. The rock hit the side of the truck with a clang and bounced off.

Them ostriches set to clattering again, and I pictured as how I might go to the back of that horse trailer, open it up, and see rain inside there and a little stream. The moistness and cool would hit my face. Inside the walls of that horse trailer, birds would be singing to beat the band, and there would be tender grass and a bunch of yellow butterflies in there, too.

T.J. drove away, raising a plume of dust, taking the ostriches, taking the rain. After a while, Pa went in the house, and, when the sun got too hot, I went in, too. We didn't talk about Willie or T.J., and that very evening Pa left for Austin, and didn't come back for three days.

When he come, he brought another girl with him, a pretty little Tex-Mex girl named Teresa, with big brown eyes and a fall of black hair. Her arms and legs was so thin that the bones seemed as if they must be hollow. There wasn't much flesh on them sparrow bones of hers, and on the inside of each arm, on the tops of her small hands, in the webbed skin between each finger, and on the back of her skinny little-girl knees, were the blue tracks of the needle.

She wasn't no older than I was.

And all of a sudden, I had *two* to care for. Pa was starting to get bad sick from drink, and sometimes he and that girl wouldn't get up till late afternoon. Pa's bedroom got nasty, like giant mice were nesting there. He never pulled up the shades. When they'd get out of bed, I'd fix them something to eat, and they'd pick at the food, neither one of them bothering to talk. Then they'd crawl back in the bedroom and shut the door, like they was trying to lock the world out. In a lot of ways, it was lonelier than having no one there at all.

Pa brought in some of the longhorns and put them in a corral. Every sixth Friday, Pa would get up, get dressed, and load up a steer. Then he'd plunk the girl in the front seat with him and drive to Austin. He started coming home regular and on time, but with a load of whiskey where the steer used to be, and a bunch of brown stuff for the girl's arm. When they got to the ranch, they'd get out of the truck and crawl right back in their nest.

Jesus. I don't think they ever even made love. It didn't look like they had the energy for it. What they did in that bedroom was a lot more

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private than fucking, a thing so terrible that I guess they thought that they just had to hide it away.

They were *dying*, is what it was. Teresa got sick first, with a bad abcessed knee. I got her up and washed, and used the same Blue Star ointment on the sore that we used on the cattle. Pa stood around with his eyes kind of glazed. I wasn't sure he knew she was sick. I didn't know if he cared.

"*Told* you I'd boil them needles for you," I told her. I was pretty angry.

"Sometimes I just forget."

"You lose your leg, *that'll* be a fucking reminder."

When she started to cry, I felt bad, as if I'd hurt a kitten.

Then Pa went down sick, but there wasn't much I could do but get some water and food in him. Teresa started washing her hair and getting dressed right. She started coming in the kitchen more, and hanging around.

"You're just a little kid," I said, staring at her baby's hands, her stick wrists. "If things was the way they *should* be, with a sheriff still around and all, he'd put Pa in *jail* because of you."

"Sheriff, he don't care who junkies fuck."

"How'd you get *on* that shit, anyway?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I always been on it."

"Get the pail and take it in to the Angus." I always had to tell her everything, spell it out, like she was stupid and not just high.

She did it, though. Everything I told her.

"Don't know what you see in Pa."

"It ain't like I love him," she said, and gave me a look.

She was staring at my chest. I was running all over sweat from the heat, and could feel the sting of the sun on my back and the sting of her gaze at my front.

"You want to fuck me?" she said.

I looked away. "No."

"I won't tell him."

"*No*."

She walked back into the house, limping a little from her leg. I watched her go, watched how she moved under her shorts. Even with the needle tracks, she was prettier and younger than the San Saba whores.

Pa got sicker instead of better, but when I was outside tending cattle, he'd stumble into the kitchen and get himself a drink. Nights he'd call to Teresa with that whispery dead-leaf voice of his, and then I'd hear her fumbling around in the kitchen.

"You can't drink, Pa," I told him. "Not while you're sick like this."

In the few weeks he'd been sick, Pa'd become an old man. His hands were all bones and veins. His eyes had sunk back into his head.

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He promised me he wouldn't drink no more, he'd tell me how it was eating up his insides and making him like an animal. He'd cry like a baby and tell me how much he goddamned loved me. But just as soon as I'd go outside to tend the animals, I'd see Teresa at the kitchen window, a bottle in her hand.

One night in the kitchen I screamed at her, "Stop giving him the whiskey! You stupid jerk! Can't you see he's dying!"

"I know his kind of need," she told me straight out, and with a smart-assed tilt to her head, like having to lean on whiskey or dope was something to be proud of. "*You* don't know nothing."

I started slamming around kitchen cabinets and throwing a pot of chili together.

"You want to fuck me?" she asked.

I turned. She was so small that her tininess made my breath catch in my throat. Her eyes were brown and huge, like the sloe eyes of deer or the kind, dumb eyes of cattle. She wasn't much like the woman in the *Playboy* picture. That woman had been soft but strong, something the earth had nurtured. Nothing fed Teresa. Not Pa. Not me.

I left the chili boiling on the stove, and we went out to the barn so Pa couldn't hear.

She must have thought I should get acquainted with need, because in the next couple of weeks, she sure introduced us. I could see her just standing there, chin on her hands the way she did, looking out to the corral, and all of a sudden that need would steamroller me.

Having her around made the desert seem okay, not lonely any more or ugly. I started thinking about how I might marry her. And, God forgive me, I started wishing Pa would go ahead and die.

When her supply of stuff started getting low, though, things just fell apart. Cleaning up after dinner one night, she started fidgeting real bad.

"I need to go into town, Tommy," she told me. "I got this real bad need to go there."

I looked up from the dishes I was washing. She was sweating. Her skin was white, and it stretched over the hollow bones of her face like paper. "No," I said.

"You don't love me," she said. "If you loved me, you'd take me."

"I love you so much, I ain't going to see you die like Pa's dying. That's how much I goddamn love you."

She sniffed and wiped her nose. The tip of it was red, but she wasn't crying. "They got methadone in Austin. It's the stuff that gets you off the horse. Otherwise, that horse just keeps on running, you know what I mean? And the ground goes by so fast, and you're up so high, that if you fall, you know it'll kill you."

She was holding herself like she was cold.

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"I been wanting to get clean a long time now." She started to shiver and looked real sick. "It's your Pa keeping me back. I can't quit without methadone, and he won't buy me none."

When I didn't answer, she told me, "You can die from quitting cold. I ain't no use to you dead."

"Okay," I said. "Just a little methadone."

I loaded a yearling steer in the truck, and we set off for Austin, me without even bothering to check on Pa, her without thinking about it, neither.

I knew that Austin had been hit harder than most places by the spotted fever, but I never expected how bad it could be. Austin looked like a town somebody'd kicked in the balls. There was empty buildings everywhere, and the state Capitol had most of its windows knocked out. There was dead grass and dead leaves all over the street, and the whole place gave me a hollow feeling in the gut, like maybe the people who'd died of the spotted fever were lurking around in the shadows, waiting.

In an apartment down by the old university, I seen the only signs of life. Three pickup trucks sat in the parking lot, and upstairs on the second floor, some lights were on.

We walked up, and a white man with dirty hair answered our knock. "Hello again, bitch. Who'd you bring with you this time?"

I wanted to punch the man in the mouth. He was too small, though. His face was too pinched. His shirt was open, and his bare chest was knobs all the way down to his stomach. I was afraid that if I hit him, my fist would go right through, and I'd find out he was just a cardboard cut-out.

Behind him, on a couch, sat a black man with a torn orange sweatshirt, and on a coffee table was a big pile of jewelry: rings and bracelets and gold watches.

"This is the old man's son," Teresa said in a tiny, apologetic voice. "We come to get some stuff. You got the stuff?"

"Methadone," I told him.

The white man ignored me. "A little. I been waiting for Julio. Delivery from Juarez tonight."

I looked at the jewelry on the table again, and knew it was dead people's jewelry.

"He brought a cow," Teresa told him.

The man on the couch stirred a little. The man at the door perked up. "Get the gun, Dave," he said.

The black man with the orange sweatshirt got up, went into the bedroom, and came back with a pistol. Then me and him walked down to the trailer.

I got in by the steer's head and the black man pushed in, too. When the

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yearling got jittery and started butting, he raised his gun. "Goddamn!" I shouted."Don't kill the fucking steer in the *trailer*. We'll *never* get him out!"

The man was shaking real bad, and he kept trying to aim in the dark. I touched his shoulder, and then jerked my hand back. I had never felt nothing like that. Under that sweatshirt, his bones was all raw, and he felt like a chicken leg a hungry dog had gone after. These men must be starving to death. And then it hit me what Teresa had seen in Pa.

I took the yearling's halter and backed him out the gate. When I got him out in the parking lot, I seen the white man was there, and I seen Teresa squatting on the asphalt, hugging her knees and shaking her head like she'd just seen something beautiful.

"Oh dear Jesus. Oh sweet Jesus," she was saying in a dreamy sort of voice.

The black man came up and tried to take the halter out of my hand. I pushed him away. He pushed too easy, as if he didn't have no substance in him. The two men backed up, scared of me, even though they was the ones with the gun. In the dark of the parking lot, they watched me for a while. The black man was licking his lips.

"Come on, honey," I said to Teresa, putting my hand down to her.

She kept rocking and shaking her head.

"Come on," I said sweet as I could. "Get up."

She didn't. After a while, her rocking started spooking me bad. "Is that how that methadone is supposed to work?" I asked the white man.

"What methadone?" he said.

My chest went numb. I dropped the lead to the steer, got in my pickup, and left. When I turned the corner at the end of the street, I heard the first of the shots. There were three of them, spaced out from each other a bit. It was only after the third shot that the bawling of that poor longhorn yearling finally stopped. Those hopheads made a mess of everything they touched.

That night, I drove down to the coast and watched the sun come up over the mud flats. I slept an hour or two in the truck, and then, about eight in the morning, I headed on back to the ranch. When I got there in the afternoon, I seen Pa wasn't in his room no more. That scared me, and I walked around the barn and the corrals, checking to see if he had dragged himself someplace to die.

When I couldn't find him, I up and packed my things: all my clothes and the 30.06 Pa had give me one Christmas. When I got back in the yard, I seen Pa. He was standing against the corral, watching the Angus sniff the longhorns.

"Take a lesson from that old bull," Pa said. I knew he was mad, and his anger had pushed a lot of the sickness out. He was smiling coldly,

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and there was color high on his cheeks. "You know, when *I* was humping her, she stayed. Soon as *you* started humping her, she left."

I remembered Teresa crouched in the parking lot, rocking, and, for a minute, I wanted to get in my truck, drive back there like blazes, and see if she was all right. The shame of what I had done, and the need to see her again, was so bad that it made my hands start to tremble.

"I'm leaving, Pa."

"Taking her?"

"No." I *wanted* to take Teresa, but I knew that if I tried to pick her up, my hands would pass right through. She had never been nothing but a ghost, one of the thousands in Austin—dead as the ghosts of the red oaks that stood watch over Llano's fields. "Heading to Michigan, I reckon."

"Well, you just get your ass in gear, then. Me and this old bull, we'll just settle down here by ourselves. He's the only thing ever goddamned understood me, anyway."

I could tell that Pa was remembering everyone and everything that had ever left him: Ma, Corpus Christi, the white-tailed deer.

In life, more than just the climate changes. People either leave you, or you leave them. Pa'd spent his whole life losing people, like he was an old man with the palsy who was always dropping his keys. At that moment, I knew that *I* was going to grow up into the opposite type—the one who always walks out.

Walking out wasn't going to be easy, though. The more I tried not to think about Teresa, or about Pa, the worse I felt, and the more my fingers twitched.

"Ain't had a drink since you left," he told me. "Don't know *why* I'm bothering to quit. Ain't much *other* joy to life."

I'd been lied enough to that I couldn't be suckered in no more. Right then, I hated Pa and Teresa and their broken promises; but I couldn't help loving them, too. There's a kind of an addiction you get to people if you live with them long enough. I'd only had a few months with Teresa, but I'd had sixteen years of Pa. "Come on and go with me," I said.

"Get out!" Pa's shout spooked the cattle.

I raised the 30.06 and he frowned at it.

"There's only one pickup," I said.

Pa seemed surprised, but then, real quick, the surprise left, and a steadiness took its place. I flicked off the safety, cocked the rifle, and raised it to my shoulder.

The *bang* that rifle made shooed the chickens out of their coop. Pa stepped back a pace, still staring at me kind of stupid. And behind Pa's back, that Angus bull dropped to his knees, and then settled over on his side, as if he was climbing into bed. A pool of blood leaked from his

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forehead and spread out across the sand. Neat, clean, and quick. That's the way you kill something.

I shot three longhorns before the rest of them got the idea and broke down the fence. They high-tailed it out into the desert, where they belonged.

When all that was left of them longhorns was the dust they had raised, I took a last glance at the dead Angus and the three dead spotted cows. Then I threw my gear and the rifle into the bed of the pickup and climbed up in the cab.

I sat there and waited. The air in the cab was blistering. In a few minutes, Pa opened the door and climbed up to sit next to me.

"Fuck it," he said. "Michigan?"

"Yeah."

"Why *Michigan?*"

"Just 'cause it's somewheres *else*." Just because the ghosts aren't there, I thought. And because if you're going to give up a habit, it's best to get a good long ways from temptation.

He glanced over at the torn screen on the front door. "Think we should lock up the house?"

"I don't imagine anybody is gonna come calling."

He sighed and settled back in his seat as I started the engine. "I don't much, either," he said. ●

FROM:

A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

HOMOPHONES

We are two words that sound like one,
Like deer and dear or dun and done.
No one would know, to hear us speak,
Our difference from week to weak.

HOMONYMS

We, by contrast, *mean* the same,
Though we assume another name.
So whether we have arms or limbs,
You'll know us as two homonyms.

—Tom Disch

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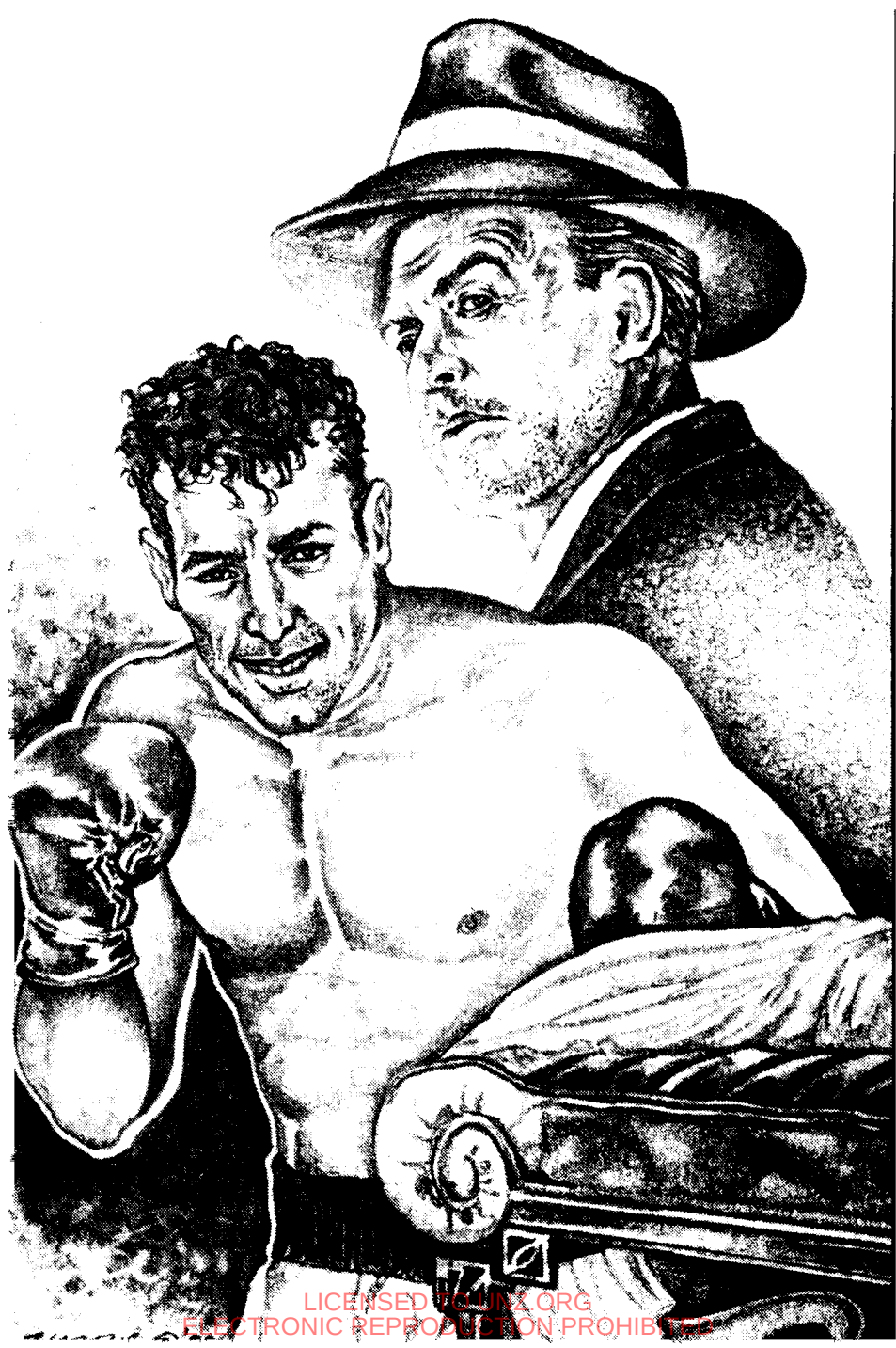

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LOWLIFES

Esther M. Friesner

Esther Friesner tells us this story "is the result of reading too much A.J. Liebling, a wonderful writer of the Guys & Dolls *era. He was a man who really knew how to appreciate New York, and alas, an author who is too often overlooked in favor of Damon Runyon. 'Lowlifes' is my tip o' the ol' fedora to both these worthy gents."*

art: Dell Harris

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Murray and I are sitting up late at the G&C Luncheonette down near the river when Jimmy Delancey comes in looking like he has lost his best friend. This is impossible, of course. Any stiff with an ounce of what the uptown crowd calls gray mattress between the ears can tell you, Jimmy Delancey's best and only friend in this town is one Mister James Delancey.

Still, Murray is a soft touch, especially since the ponies have been cooperative to him today (there being no mudders; Murray can not pick a mudder to save his soul), so he asks, "Whassamarrer, Jimmy? Your boy go down?" Jimmy is a fight manager who always has a boy in the bouts somewhere. His boys also always seem to be losing these bouts, so Murray's question is a safe bet.

"Maybe he got a letter from Pres'dent Roozfelt tellin' him that W.P.A. don't do nothin' for punk fighters," says one of the local G&C wags.

"Pipe down," says Ernestine from behind the counter.

Jimmy just shakes his head and says, "It's no good, boys. I am finished. It's that bloodsucking leech. It's that no good stinking vampire what's been my downfall."

Here is where Murray remarks, "It looks to my untrained ear like congratulations are in order. I was unaware that you was so much as stepping out with a lady of the fair sex, let alone had committed matrimony."

Jimmy looks up from the glass of tea that Ernestine puts in front of him and his eyes are cold. (Ernestine is the best and only waitress at the G&C, on account she is also the proprietress. There is just her and Billy the cook who she got off a Norwegian freighter when it maroons him without pay by the Brooklyn Navy Yard. But this is another story. She knows us and what we like to drink and what we eat on Tuesday lunch as opposition to Wednesday dinner and how deep in the hole we are to the G&C Luncheonette. She will forgive a man for bouncing a check off her like she was a handball court, but God alone help you if you tell her "I would prefer a cuppa coffee insteada tea today, just for a change." Ernestine does not like changes.)

(Oh yeah: Billy the cook's name is not Billy. It is something more in keeping with him being Norwegian or Swede or one of them. Ernestine calls him Billy because her other cook was named Billy only he died from drinking grain alcohol in the wrong company and a knife in the belly after. But like I am saying, this is also another story likewise.)

So like I am saying already, Jimmy looks up, and he has got a face on him that looks like a hank of Atlantic City saltwater taffy, the green kind—either mint or lime, it is all the same to me—while it's being pulled on the machine. "I see you boys are not above making light of another man's troubles," he says.

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Now here you have got to understand that Murray and I are separated from Jimmy Delancey by religious differences: We are strictly betting with the horses but Jimmy does the fight game. There is no facet of the manly art as she is played in New York than Jimmy does not have a finger in at one time or another.

Back when he was not Jimmy Delancey but plain Hymie Leibovitz of a modest Delancey Street *pied a terrapin*, like the Frenchies would have it, he even went a few rounds at some local clubs. That was when he changed his name. (He figured if a Delancey hits the canvas it is not so bad, but if a Leibovitz takes a pounding out in public it is just giving the goys what they want to see and ticket prices do not repay this with sufficient liberality.) He did pretty good, too. It did not take him long, however, to discover that it was possible to make a good dollar in the fights without getting someone else's fist through your teeth.

Now when you have got your usual run of sporting men in this town, you will find most of them spread their losses around to a number of entertainments. Only once in awhile you will encounter people like Murray and I and Jimmy who are afictionados of one game and no other. This makes our devotion all the more fierce. Also this accounts for a certain amount of good-natured jibery among us at the expense of the other fella's chosen manner of losing money.

But what Jimmy says about Murray and I making fun of a mug in a jam is an insult! Murray gets all red the way he does, so you could see these white patches stand out on top of his head where there is no hair worth mentioning. When he gets good and mad, they look like the map of Europe. I was compelled to terminate my association with P.S. 26 before we made any great study of geography, but even I could pick out a clear France on Murray's bald spot, so you can imagine his feelings.

"Delancey, you oughta be shamed!" Murray thunders.

"Shaddup," says Ernestine. She brings us a nice apple pie.

"Shaddup, you want?" Murray sits up straighter on his stool, one hand pressed to the bosom of his shirt. "I should shaddup when a man accuses me of hitting him when he's down? Phil, you ever know me I hit a man when he's down?"

"Never," I say. This is good enough for Murray. He snorts at Jimmy and gets down to business with the pie. (Ernestine's pie is truly sublime; a wise man does not treat it in a cavalier manner.) This would have been the end of the discussion, only Jimmy opens up his yap again.

"A quarter a million dollars," he says like the words are acid. He drinks his tea. There is not much custom in the G&C Luncheonette during our usual hours of patronage, but what there is shuts up and sits up tall and pays a whole lot of attention to Jimmy Delancey all of a sudden.

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Murray is the first one to ask, "This a quarter a million bucks of which you speak, Jimmy . . . you know someone which has got it?"

"Had it." Jimmy finishes his tea. Ernestine brings him a fresh glass and a nice meatloaf sandwich because she knows. "It is I and no other of which I speak in connection with the previously mentioned sum of cash. And I could have it again, if . . ." His voice sort of trails off.

Murray hops down from his stool and scurries over to jump onto the one next to Jimmy. "If—?" he says, smiling and making encouraging moves with his hands.

But all Jimmy does is throw his head back and tell the ceiling fan, "Oh, that rotten, lowdown, lousy, stinking *bitch!*"

It is shortly thereafter that I step out of the G&C Luncheonette to see whether Jimmy and Murray could use a hand climbing out of the gutter. This is where Ernestine has tossed the two of them, being as she went to Catholic school and has a strict sensibility about indelicate language in her establishment. Ernestine stands a hairnet shy of six feet tall and weighs in like a Packard sedan, so it is a wise man who respects her little foibles.

Murray picks himself up and brushes off the suit. "This is what I get for associating with pugs," he says bitterly.

Jimmy is truly shamed. He knows how Murray was only subjected to Ernestine's rough treatment because of where he was sitting. When Ernestine hears a word she does not like, she ejects everyone in the general vicinity of that word, just to make sure she got the right party.

"I'm sorry, Murray," Jimmy says. "You got to understand, I am a desperate man. I was not lying when I spoke of a quarter a million dollars, which is even as we speak dangling inches from my palm." He sighs. "It might as well be dangling on the moon."

"How would a mug like you come even within smelling distance of that kind of dough?" Murray asks. All the old pony-player's contempt for pugilistical people comes right to the top, even if it is not polite. Murray's dignity has been wounded, which makes him forget his manners.

"Come with me to Sherry's and I'll tell you," Jimmy says. "I'll treat." This is acceptable to Murray's dignity, so we go.

Sherry's is a little after-hours club that used to be a speak before Repeal. The whole West Side was crawling with places like that in the old days—nothing fancy, just a bunch of little hideaways where a man could go forget his troubles or look up some promising new ones. Now most of them got liquor licenses and went legitimate or broke, but Sherry's stayed the same. Sherry herself always said that her mama back in Arkansaw must of named her after a drink for a reason. She never had use for any other license than her birth certificate. It saw her through Prohibition and three marriages and let her earn enough to put

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her kid through the Gunnery and into Yale and she was damned if she was gonna monkey with success.

(I realize that Sherry's aversion to licenses does not quite jibe with her matrimonial history. Suffice it to say, the lady herself has been known to refer to her partners, present and previous, as husbands-without-portfolio, and that is official enough for her. Besides, two of them from the Boom years became unavoidably shot by their business competitors and Sherry was herself personally constrained to ventilate the third as a discouragement to his continued socializing with a Keith circuit contortionist named Ginger, so it hardly paid to take out a license on them. She is what the Frenchies term an *espree libra* and the cops never did make the charges stick.)

There is no sign to tell you where to find Sherry's. If you do not already have this information then it is none of your business. Sherry's fourth husband, Salvatore, hangs around the establishment's front door to help those poor souls who do not have the native smarts to know what is and is not their business. He smiles when he sees us, though, and even yells back to Sherry to come out and see what the cat dragged in.

Sherry is a beautiful woman of what the Frenchies call *dune certain domage*. She comes soaring out of the back room in a cloud of egret feathers and *My Sin* and hugs us, spending most of her time on Jimmy. Sherry is a good businesswoman of whom I have often heard expressed that she has a nose for money. It is a very cute nose, which is not to detract from its accuracy, so I figure if she is hanging onto Jimmy like that there must be something in what he says about this a quarter a million.

"Where have you been?" she squeals, giving him one more squeeze. She has left a big pink splotch of face powder over his blue stubble. It is kind of like a Belasco stage lighting effect. "The last I hear, you finally got your mitts on a fighter who could do something besides waltz with the turnbuckle."

"You heard right," Jimmy tells her. "Nicolino Battista has got the fists and the moves and the smarts to take him and me both all the way to the top. Unfortunately, this will not happen. If you will be kind enough to serve me and my associates, I will tell you the whole sorry tale."

Sherry plops us down at a good table and brings us what to drink, then she joins us. Her face is hard as my mother-in-law's kugel. In the circles in which I move, there is only one thing worse than having no prospects and that is to poormouth good prospects. Anyone can be flat—those are the breaks—but it takes a real bum to say he's got a sure thing that isn't gonna work. It is bad for the rest of our morale.

The story which Jimmy now unfolded under the hard eye of Sherry and the compassionate ear of Murray and I was simple and plain and old

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as hard luck. Jimmy often checked out the local churches and the Y for talent. He found a kid named Nicolino Battista in a church basement in Little Italy where the priest gave boxing lessons so that later on the parish kids could pound each other blind on the street in a more sportsmanlike manner.

It didn't take Jimmy long to see that Nicolino had what it takes. It didn't take Nicolino long to see that Jimmy was his ticket off Mulberry Street and into the highlife. It was not such a frequent occurrence that Jimmy ran into a fighter whose plans for the future went beyond laying out his next opponent, but Nicolino was that man. Only nineteen and already he had his whole life figured. He would fight, he would win, he would make it to the top, and then he would take his winnings and buy a nice chunk of land out in California, maybe in the San Fernando Valley where he had an uncle and some grapes.

With Jimmy training and managing him, Nicolino soon made short work of the minor talents along the way. Murray and I do not follow the fight game, but Sherry nods her head and says, "I think I recall reading something in the *Trib* about a rising young middleweight named Little Nicky Battista."

"That would be he." Jimmy taps his nose so as to indicate *bingo.*

"Then that would also be the same Little Nicky who is presently looking at the championship?" Sherry asks.

Again Jimmy makes with the nose. "Now you see where I have been for so long. What with the gymnasium training and the Jersey camps and the out-of-town fights and all, I have been looking after business. I am also making a nice dollar on the side, laying wagers on my boy. Nicolino was a pleasure to manage. When we was out of town in a hotel I would never have to keep an eye on the maid to make sure he didn't bribe her to smuggle him in any liquor or nothing. I told him a thing was bad for a boy in training, he listened. He was smart enough to value my experience in the fight game and I was smart enough to smell gold in his fists. It was a marriage made in heaven."

Jimmy sighs. "The only trouble with a marriage is you need a woman for at least some of it."

Here Jimmy lays his cards on the table and they are all coming up female. Even Sherry shakes her head the way you do while viewing the guest of honor at a good Irish wake. She knows that for a fighter in training, women are spelled N-O.

"I don't know where he met her," Jimmy says. "It happens in town, this I do know, but where he found an item like her—!"

"Maybe she found him," Sherry says. She is wise to the ways of her fellow women. "Lots of ladies find young fighters very congenial company."

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"There, there, Jimmy," Murray says, patting him on the shoulder. "So your boy has made a little stumble on his way to the finish line. This happens. It don't mean he's outa the race. If he has the smarts you claim he does, he will put aside the lady behind him and think of his future once more."

"No, he won't." Jimmy looks about as optimistic as a turkey the day before Thanksgiving. "Not this doll."

This surprises us. Jimmy is not one to be impressed by the allurements of the opposite sex, being as he is a businessman first. Indeed, all of his commerce with the fairer section of the populace is conducted on a strictly cash basis. The word from the sporting girls on Broadway is that he is a good, steady customer who does not make trouble. His trade is therefore very welcome among the, as the Frenchies call them, *fees de jaw*.

Jimmy drinks his drink and Sherry pours him another. "A quarter a million dollars," he says into the glass. "What with the purses this kid could win and the friendly wagers an honest man could lay on the side and the interested parties who might be willing to buy a piece of a headliner, let alone a champeen, a quarter a million dollars is a modest estimation of what this woman has leeched out from under me. This is a fact." He drinks the drink and takes the bottle from Sherry, to spare her the trouble of the next few several refills.

Sherry gets this look on her. In the old days I saw her look like that when some rich Midwest wheat king got a few too many under his belt and started acting like he owned the place. He would wake up the next morning in police custody and not remember anything much except the very clear notion that he did not own Sherry's.

"Jimmy," she says, "I'm going to help you with this one. Little Nicky's gotta be set straight. You may not be my friend, but you're a good, clean fight manager. I respect this about you. The fights've been my especial weakness for a long time and it pains me to see a promising new talent like Little Nicky about to go down for the count just because there's some rich harpy out there sucking him dry."

"How do you know she is rich?" I ask.

Sherry gives me a look like I was just hatched. "They're always rich. This gives them too much time on their hands and not enough brains to know what to do with it." She stands up from the table like she's the Queen of Sheba about to give orders and says, "Take me to the bitch."

She is so magnificent when she says this that I believe in all sincerity not even Ernestine would be able to lay a glove on her for using that kinda language. For one thing, Salvatore is always right there to back up Sherry and he can whip Ernestine three out of five in a fair fight.

"Awright," Jimmy agrees, pushing his chair back and getting up slow. "Awright, I can do that. She's got an apartment at the Plaza which is

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probably right where Little Nicky is right now. I been there enough times, yelling for him to get the hell out and rest up, so I can take you right there. But it won't do a damn bit of good."

"We'll see about that," says Sherry, and the smell I catch off her isn't *My Sin*, it's gunpowder, dry.

By the time Salvatore gets the last customers encouraged out of Sherry's and the place is locked up, it is pushing dawn. Sherry has used the time well, going upstairs to her apartment and changing into battle clothes and warpaint. When Murray and I see her, we can not help but whistle and utter other sundry expressions of appreciation. Not every woman can wear that many diamonds at once to some advantage. She is also wearing a dress of blue satin and a quantity of white minks that causes her *onsombul* to remind me of a *Winter in Connecticut* postcard which my lovely wife Sylvia once sent me as a sentimental keepsake prior to our nuptials.

Salvatore gets us a cab and we motor over to the Plaza. You can just see the first rays of sun laying themselves down over Fifth from the crosstown streets like yellow Board of Ed. pencils outa the East River. The doorman is half asleep, and the other half's breathing out something Canadian, so when he catches an eyeful of Sherry's minks and diamonds he doesn't even try to stop us. This is despite of the fact that while Salvatore's still got a tux on, Jimmy and Murray and I are as usual.

Jimmy does not lie when he says he knows where the lady is rooming. He takes us to it like a bird dog. She has a suite not too far down from the top floor and he pounds on the door good and loud. From inside we hear a deep voice expressing a few sharp thoughts in Eyetalian, then a softer purr bubbling up and soothing the savage breast.

The latch clicks and the door opens slow. I am starting to get second thoughts about all this. If the lady is as rich as Jimmy says, what is she most likely to do when she finds a crowd like us on her doormat at this hour of the morning? I will give any odds she hollers for the cops. I step around behind Salvatore so as to anticipate a hasty departure, should this prove necessary. My Sylvia is a very understanding woman when it comes to the hours I keep but she draws the line at bailing me out of penal facilities.

"Greetings," says a voice that's like sliding into a nice hot bath after a hard day. "I am Irene Kerapalios."

I peek out from around behind Salvatore. My jaw hits the carpet. Now I see what they mean about there is no sure thing in this world except leaving it on the horizontal. (Except for Sylvia's uncle Pinchas, who was caught in a fireworks factory blowup down South. But that does not significate.) All my bets about the lady taking one gawk at us and screaming are so much also-rans.

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She is standing there in the doorway, cool like ice, wearing a little silk nothing from maybe Scrapperelli that trickles all the way down so it covers her feet. It is the same deep green like her eyes, which remind me of the ocean off Coney Island. Her hair is black and falls all over her shoulders, which are so white and soft-looking they are giving Sherry's minks a run for the money.

"May I help you gentlemen?" she asks. We just stand there. Even Salvatore is knocked for a loop. I am hearing this drip-drip-drip from his general direction and when I look to see what is amiss I worry that maybe the Plaza, being a classy joint, will object to a man which is drooling on their carpet.

Only Jimmy is not stunned by the lady's looks. (Neither, it should go without saying, is Sherry, but she is doing the slow burn and is therefore as speechless as the rest of us.) He lunges forward, wagging a finger in Miss Kerapalios' face, and bawls, "Where's Little Nicky? I know you got him in there and I'm here to get him the hell out!"

"I see," she says. The lady smiles like Jimmy has just got off a good Marx Brothers line. I never see lips that red unless it comes out of a tube, only somehow I get the hunch that with this doll it is strictly Mother Nature working overtime. "And I see you have also brought some—how do you say it?—muscle." Her eyelashes are maybe an inch thick and she bats them at Salvatore. He takes a couple clumsy steps forward like he's a doped-up dog someone's yanking on a leash until Sherry steps in and gives him one in the belly with the elbow.

Miss Kerapalios laughs. She steps aside and bows her head a little like she's the men's washroom attendant at Radio City. "Come in by all means," she says.

These are some fancy digs which Miss Kerapalios has at the Plaza. The draperies are drawn over the windows, but she has got enough lamps going for a man to see that the appointments here are strictly first-rate. Most of the stuff is *Ompeer* style—which I know because that is my Sylvia's favorite. (She says it is my great knowledge of Frenchie scholarship which has influenced her taste in this direction.) There are also some assorted gewgaws and knick-knacks scattered about in a casual manner which a lesser man than myself would pocket if not for the fact that most of it is too big to fit without stretching the material all out of shape bad.

It is also like Jimmy says: Little Nicky is there. He does not look *Ompeer* in the slightest. He is sprawled out on Miss Kerapalios's sofa wearing a pair of blue satin pajama bottoms. He sits there and he smiles when he sees us. For a kid nineteen, he has got a deal of meat on the bone, not to mention stubble on the face and hair on the chest. I am thinking up a theory which I may send to Perfesser Einstein down in

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Jersey (after I test it out on Murray) about how spaghetti grows hair on a party. When I was nineteen, I did not in any way resemble this specimen. The only hair I had on my chest belonged to whatever Eyetalian kid was presently pinning me to the sidewalk.

When Jimmy gets an eyeful of his boy, he hits the ceiling. Right away he is jumping up and down, shaking his fists and calling Little Nicky ten kinds of stupid wop. Little Nicky does not appear to take offense at whatever Jimmy says. I am at this time keeping my eye on Salvatore, in case that gentleman should take it into his noggin to resent Jimmy's choice of vocabulary as applied to a fellow Eyetalian *landsman* and clobber him one, *dapray le steal de Ernestine*, as the Frenchies would say. But Salvatore is still ogling Miss Kerapalios, so that is all right.

It is Sherry who steps in. She must figure that Little Nicky is so accustomed to Jimmy's lectures that they are to him like water off a duck's ass, so she grabs Jimmy by the collar and hauls him back so she can take on the kid. She jams her hands on her hips and leans forward so he cannot help but get a good look at what her diamonds and her minks and her dress are not covering. Sherry is still a dish by any standard, but she is no competition for the goods what Miss Kerapalios is selling. Still, she has got it, and she is smart enough to use it to get the kid's attention.

"Little Nicky," she says, "quit fooling around. You're breaking training and you know it. You tired of the fight game? Then be honest and cut poor Jimmy loose once and for all, clean, instead of taking him down with you by inches."

"Save it, baby." Little Nicky laughs. "I'll be all right," he says, waving Sherry off. "I'm gonna be the Friday night headliner at the Garden. You'll see. Irene, she says I'm one of the gods."

"In a pig's eye!" Sherry kind of spits back. "Unless now the stumblebums and canvasbacks got into the god business."

Little Nicky goes stiff, but Sherry changes her approach without him getting the chance to say nothing. It is like watching Joan Crawford turn into Shirley Temple, like Lon Chaney. "Look, maybe this is really all you're good for," she tells him. "Maybe this is what you want. But Jimmy doesn't get a cut of all the gold cigarette cases and satin underwear this cooch gives you 'cause you made her day. A man's gotta earn a dollar in this town. All the time he wastes on you, Jimmy could be managing some other fighter who's serious about making it to the top. How you're going, the only way you'll see the inside of the Garden on a Friday night is from behind a broom."

This does it. Little Nicky stops smiling. He jumps up, both fists open for business. I do not think he intends to clobber Sherry, but that is something that will have to remain what we call one of the mysteries of

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the universe because before he can take a swing or anything he goes white in the face and cross-eyed. Next we know, he is falling forward and lands right on his puss on a very nice rug indeed.

Jimmy lets out a wail like he's a mother lion which has lost her pups. Murray and I do not know the fight game, like I say, but we do know that all Jimmy's caterwauling is not going to do Little Nicky a lot of good. We get down on the carpet and turn the boy over like he was a flapjack. He is still smiling with his eyes open and for a very unsettling minute or two or less I think he is maybe dead.

"He is not dead," says Miss Kerapalios. She has chosen to seat herself on what the Frenchies in the furniture trade would call your *maury chase lounge* and is toying with the affections of a box of bonbons on a side table. Her long silk gown trails off the end of the chair, still covering up her feet, and through the flimsy cloth you can observe some mighty fine action on the part of her haunches. Salvatore is doing this observing.

"Then what's the matter with him?" Jimmy howls. "Lookit! Just lookit!" He makes this big gesture with his hand which is generally reserved for movie heroines showing off their starving babies in the weepies. "If you got him on dope, lady, I don't care if you own the stinking Plaza, I'm gonna get the bulls on you so fast—"

"He should not have exerted himself so soon afterward, that is all. I did not take enough blood for him to die." *Blood?* She says it like this is nothing. She picks out a chocklit, she opens her mouth, and there are these two very unsettling fangs where your usual run of doll has got the pearlies. She jabs the candy with one of these, sucks out the center, and tosses away the empty. "Ugh. Coconut," she says, making a face.

In view of developments, Murray and I give Little Nicky the once over. Sure enough, on his neck there are these two puncture marks. Salvatore falls to his knees, big lug that he is, and starts fumbling with the front of his shirt until he manages to yank up this gold crucifix on a chain. He commences to pray very loud, totally indifferent to the allure of Miss Kerapalios's silk-upholstered haunches. Miss Kerapalios ignores him, once more rifling the candy box.

"Aha!" Sherry yells. It escapes me why she should look so happy to learn that there is this new wrinkle to Miss Kerapalios's personality. Then she strides across the room and yanks the draperies wide open. Sunshine comes pouring in over everything in sight. This includes our hostess.

Miss Kerapalios looks up and makes like Mona Lisa. "I saw that movie seven times," she tells Sherry. "I read the book twice, I adore Bela Lugosi, don't you?" She gets her another chocklit and sucks the daylights out of it. "I am not a vampire," she says, licking her fangs. "I am *lamia*."

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"I don't care if you're Eleanor Roosevelt!" Sherry hollers. "In this town we don't go around drinking middleweights!"

"I beg your pardon," Miss Kerapalios replies, very smooth and *cheek*. "I was unaware of the local customs."

She sashays over to this big mirror in a gilt-edged frame and we can see her image the same as if she was normal. "There," she says, showing us what we already see. "The undead cast no reflection. To them, sunshine is anathema, and the stake through the heart brings death. But not to me." She goes back to the *chase* and winks at Sherry, who is sizing up the chair legs with maybe that bit about the stake in mind. "Don't bother," she says.

Jimmy is besides himself, pacing up and down, wringing his hands. "A leech I called her!" he tells the ceiling. "A vampire, even! Was I right? Was I right?"

Murray and I tell him he was right. This does not assuage Jimmy Delancey. "*Now* she stands there and says she drinks my boy's blood but she's *not* no vampire! So what else is left she should be? A landlord, maybe? Is this a system?"

Miss Kerapalios clicks her tongue, only it sounds different, probably on account of the fangs. "I tell you, I am not any sort of what you would call vampire; I am *lamia. Lamia!*"

Sherry sighs and tears her eyes off the chair legs real reluctant. "Well, honey, whatever you call yourself, it's all Greek to me."

"Yes! Yes, that is it exactly!" Miss Kerapalios leaps from the *chase* and is across the room kissing Sherry on both cheeks before anyone can blink, like maybe she is fixing to award her the *craw dugair* (of the which Frenchie medal for military progress I was sorely cheated out of during the late war, but I am not bitter). "It is Greek!" Miss Kerapalios exclaims. "*I* am Greek! I am also unlike the northern vampire who must pawn his soul to hell in exchange for his unnatural life. I have no soul to pawn. I am by my very nature immortal."

"Aw, lady," Murray protests, still chafing Little Nicky's wrists. "Please, lady, don't be so hard on yourself. So you made a mistake—he's a good looker, the kid—but you can turn it around. We won't say anything if you won't." Murray is very *galawnt*.

"Not *immoral*, you dope," Sherry says. She gives Miss Kerapalios one of these looks like *Men!* All of a sudden the dolls are very buddy-buddy, but I have never laid any odds to understanding them so I let it pass.

"The *lamiae* are an ancient race," Miss Kerapalios says. Now Murray and I are paying some attention. If there is one thing we know it is races. "We delight in the society of mortals, for without the bright achievements of your evanescent lives our own eternity would be one unending tedium. Poets especially charm us, as do all creative souls. From time to time we

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sample your blood, believing that through its unique bouquet we may someday discover what it is that separates the artist from the clod. Yet we do not require your blood to sustain us. No, in truth we prefer to feast on rarer fare."

Murray is looking at me and I at him. "Do you get it, Phil?" he asks.

"All I am getting from this is that she is a society dame who likes a nice bouquet of flowers once in awhile, as what doll don't?"

"Also champagne," Murray indicates. "On account of it is, like she says, evanescent. Unless she means Moxie."

Miss Kerapalios looks us over, one by one. She is not smiling so much. "What an age!" she says at the ceiling. Between her and Jimmy the ceiling is having all the good conversations. "What a leaden age of animate clay! I shall perish for lack of decent fare, I know it!"

"Again with the fare? Lady, I don't know what's your beef," Murray tells her. "You don't like what the hacks charge, you can always take the El like the rest of us."

Miss Kerapalios yowls so loud I am afraid maybe the hotel dick will show up to ask where she is keeping the cats. Salvatore is still praying pretty strong into the stretch and Murray and I are starting to get a little color back into Little Nicky's cheeks, so it is left to Jimmy and Sherry to pound the lady on the back and try to make her shut up some.

"Look," Jimmy tells her, "I think I getcha. What I don't get is how come you pick on my boy? He's a fighter, not a poet."

"So you *do* understand." I could maybe be wrong, but I think I see something flare up in Miss Kerapalios's eyes like someone struck a pair of green matches on their trouser seat. She grabs Jimmy's wrists and pulls him close. "Yes, I read it in your soul that you are not like these earthworms." She gives Murray and I the fish eye.

"Hey!" Murray objects. "I resent that!" He does. On his bald spot, France is showing up loud and clear.

Jimmy shrugs. "Well, you gotta make allowances for them, on account they are mere railbirds." This remark lets me pinpoint Paris on Murray's dome.

"But surely you must understand, then," she says, lacing her arm around Jimmy's a coupla times like it's a potted ivy from the Five and Dime. "The art of pugilism is precisely that: an art! It was recognized as such in my native Greece, and as such it must likewise claim its artists. He is one, your young Mr. Battista. I can scent these things. I am never mistaken. The first time I saw him fight, the passion for complete and utter possession of his gifts welled up so hotly within me that I lost consciousness of all else." By the time she unloads all this, her eyes are heating up the room like a three-alarmer.

"Lady, I don't know from art," Jimmy says. "All I know is if you don't

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put a lid on it, Little Nicky's gonna be so outa condition he couldn't lick the ref."

"But what am I to do?" Miss Kerapalios whimpers. "The blood, the sex, they are only poor substitutes for what I truly desire, yet he will not grant it to me. Feeding this way I hunger, but at least I do not starve!"

"Sex?" Sherry is livid. She has got these two little red dots on her cheeks that are standing out like stoplights. "You've got the gall to talk like that in mixed company, with a *kid* here?" She waves at Little Nicky. It is obviously immaterial to Sherry that the boy is presently out cold and has not heard a thing, nor that he has been the frequent recipient of the item which Miss Kerapalios has so improperly mentioned out loud. What counts by her is that he is not yet twenty-one and has got a mother somewhere on Mulberry Street. "The kind of mouth you've got, honey, isn't fit for a decent woman to listen to. If my mama was here, she'd wash it out for you but good! You know, I wouldn't go bellyaching about how hungry you are if I were you. From where I stand, I'd say you could do with shedding a few off those hips, sister."

All the fire in Miss Kerapalios's eyes goes off to join Peary at the Pole. She reaches for these skinny little straps holding up her gown, yanks them both off the shoulder and makes with a wiggle. The whole *megillah* falls to the floor in a puddle of green silk at her feet.

Which feet she has not got. We are looking at a sample of very handsome naked female woman from the waist up, and a couple five dozen pounds of naked boa constrictor from the waist down.

"Might you suggest the proper diet for me then, madame?" she asks Sherry, smiling so the fangs show up good.

Sherry screams. Salvatore faints. Murray and I both check the door but she is between us and it. I am trying to remember whether Sylvia knows where I hide the life insurance policy until I remember we cashed it in last summer so we could go to Saratoga.

Only Jimmy is not acting at all perturbed by this reptilish turn of events. Maybe he is going to the Bronx Zoo more often than Murray and I, who knows? Maybe he is just falling back on the cold-blooded way a lot of ex-fighters get when they find themselves in a tight spot. However, I would say that Miss Kerapalios looks to have wrote the book on cold-blooded.

Miss Kerapalios stops smiling. She looks at Jimmy like she is the one on the receiving end of seeing a freak. "I do not frighten you?" she asks.

"I seen worse," he says, very cool. "No offense."

Now she is smiling again. These ripples run from her belly button down to the tip of her tail and the scales melt away until she is standing there on a set of very attractive pins looking all female, only still buck naked. "And now?" she asks sweetly.

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Jimmy sucks in his lower lip and says, "I have got to admit, I have not seen much better. I assume you got a reason for choosing to look like a sidewinder in front of guests?"

She shrugs. "Looking fully human all the time is for me like wearing a tuxedo is for you. It is fine to behold from the outside, but it is not comfortable from the in."

"Okay," Jimmy says. "It's your digs. Make yourself to home."

Miss Kerapalios gives these shivers again and whammo, she's back to being half a snake. She slithers over to the *chase* and leans back on the cushions. "Chocolate?" she says, offering the box to Sherry.

This is, as they say, an empty gesture. Sherry has stopped screaming and is presently taking five down on the floor with Murray and I and Little Nicky and Salvatore, which leaves Jimmy the only fighter still on his feet. By him I am guessing this is as good as a win, even if it is only a judgment call. He decides to go for the purse.

"Awright, so it's not the blood and it's not the—" he checks Sherry, who is still peacefully folded up on the carpet, before he says "—sex. So what is it? You want something Little Nicky's not giving you, maybe we can make a deal. You leave my boy alone, I find you someone who can give you what you're after. Okay?"

Miss Kerapalios gets this funny look on her, like my old second grade teacher Miss O'Brien used to get when I explained how come I wasn't in class for a couple few weeks on account I was attending my gramma's funeral out at Belmont. "You are a unique man, sir," she says. "If I so desired, I could wrap my tail around your neck—around all of your necks—and snap them like a bundle of dried straws. Yet you have the audacity to offer me *deals?*"

Jimmy makes with the shoulders. "We deal, everyone's happy. You got something against happy? But we don't deal, we both lose. It's like Sherry said: I can let Little Nicky go. Word gets out he's washed up, he don't get no more fights, he's a bum, you're out a cheap lunch. Also, like you say, you're out a ring artist. Me, I gotta start at the bottom again with another boy. That's no picnic, but I'll live. I been on the bottom enough times so I know the neighborhood. Look, you want artists? I'll get you artists. I got a cousin Benny down in Greenwich Village who does things with paint. Just say the word and he's yours. But you gotta tell me what you want or—"

"Souls," she says. "I want human souls."

"Oh." Jimmy scratches his head. "Sorry, you can't have Benny, then. Aunt Rifka would kill me."

Miss Kerapalios commences to cry. It is a very moving spectacle, not unlike some scene which happened in *Ben Hur* the details of which elude me. "Alas, they were right, my people!" she wails. "They warned me not

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to emigrate. They said that America was a wasteland where I would perish of hunger. Can you know how long I seek a true artist? Only to learn, on finding him, that he will deny me that which I most crave."

"Well, honey, when you waltz up to a guy and ask for his soul—" Jimmy has at his disposal a very much Frenchie *kay voolay voo* sort of gesture, which he now employs. "Mulberry Street is no picnic, but it beats the hell out of—well, hell."

The tears which have been clouding Miss Kerapalios's pretty kisser now dry up. "Ai!" she is heard to exclaim. "You Americans. If you do not confuse me first with the Balkan vampire you confound me with your devils. I am no such fiend. I devour the artist's soul, but fill him at the same time with a searing, immortal fire which pours itself back into his art until all dross is burned away, leaving only the light. His body may perish in the conflagration, yet his art is hardened in the flame. It endures forever."

"How about them apples," says Jimmy, duly impressed. He scratches his chin, then crooks a finger Miss Kerapalios should slither over to him so they can have a private conversation. She does this.

Murray and I are watching them for some time until Miss Kerapalios lifts her chin and stares at Jimmy. She lays a red fingernail to her lips and says, "In your own way, Mr. Delancey, in your own chosen medium, I believe that you too must be an artist."

(Murray remarks to me *DeSoto vochi* that what Jimmy Delancey is an artist in is what you generally find decorating improperly maintained stalls at Belmont.)

"Call me Hymie," Jimmy says, and slips one arm around Miss Kerapalios's scaly yet svelte midsection.

It is several weeks since Murray and I have seen Jimmy Delancey over to the G&C Luncheonette. We are not rendered too dejected by his absence, as our last social contact with this individual was him encouraging Miss Kerapalios to ring up the hotel dick and give the rest of us the bum's rush out of her suite.

It being Friday night, Ernestine has just bestowed on us an order of codfish balls with mashed potatoes and peas, when all of a sudden the door opens and in comes Sherry. This does not merely take Murray and I aback, it completely stupefies us, as Friday night is a heavy traffic time over to Sherry's place of business. Murray, always the gent, gets up and offers her both his stool and his codfish, the both of which the lady accepts graciously.

"So, Sherry," Murray says, taking the seat beside her and signaling for Ernestine to fetch him another order of victuals. "What brings you here? Is Salvatore minding the shop?"

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"Salvatore is in a seminary upstate," Sherry replies. She sounds quite philosophical.

"What were the charges, if that is not too indiscreet a question?" I ask.

"I'm not talking Sing-Sing," Sherry tells me, stabbing a codfish ball with cruel violence. "I'm talking a real seminary, like they go to to become priests. Ever since we came back from the Plaza, that time we went with Jimmy Delancey, my Sally's been talking nothing except saving his soul, finding his vocation. He thinks that Greek bimbo was some sort of heavenly sign about how all dames are poison. I tried to tell him she was just a monster—I mean, he's seen enough Karloff movies—but he wouldn't listen." She chomps the codfish ball, but there is something in the way her jaws are working that tells me she is thinking about chewing up another sort of similarly shaped apparatus entirely.

This is perhaps not the best of moments to be posing such a question, but Murray knows nothing of timing so he asks, "And do you hear anything from either Jimmy Delancey or the reptilian doll lately?"

Sherry's hand slams down on the lunch counter. When she lifts it it has laid down two pair of ringside tickets for the Garden tonight. "Not a peep outa them," she says, "but you can bet your life they are gonna plenty hear from me."

So we go. Ernestine locks up and comes along because by the time she sees the tickets and says how she means to attend the middleweight championship bout, it is too late to tell her otherwise, not that we would dare try. On the way over to the Garden Sherry tells us how she got the tickets in the mail from Little Nicky Battista.

"He said he owed us the saving of his soul," Sherry says. "I was the only one who he could find an address." Her mouth gets small. "Somebody owes me something, that's for sure, and it's not just some lousy boxing tickets."

There are long stories and there are short stories and that about covers all bets. To make one into the other, when we get to the Garden, there is Jimmy Delancey in Little Nicky's corner and there in the shadow of the turnbuckle is Miss Kerapalios. She is wearing again the very *cheek cootoor*, only since her sable coat goes all the way to the floor it is my bet she is scales and not gams underneath. She sees us and smiles and waves. Sherry does something back, only it is not a wave and it is not friendly and I am glad Ernestine does not catch a glimmer of it or she might get her foibles in an uproar and attempt to bust that finger right off Sherry's hand.

I am no expert, but even to me it looks like a good bout. Little Nicky fights the good fight, and for a time it is anybody's match. Even though Murray and I are not followers of the manly art, there is a certain fascination which overtakes one when seated so close to the action. Pretty

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soon Murray is jumping up and down and shouting and even hugging Ernestine when Little Nicky lands a good one. I, however, become distracted by the sudden departure of Sherry, who is seated to my left.

I see where she is going and I am trepidated. She is circling around to get to where Jimmy and Miss Kerapalios are holding down the fort for Little Nicky. I follow her, since I feel that the doll has been given the fuzzy end of the lollipop insofar as the tragic loss of Salvatore to the religious life. Sherry has already got a rep for being a smidgin too hot-blooded in matters *doo coor*, as the Frenchies so aptly put it, and deserves better out of life than an attempted murder charge with Jimmy Delancey in the supporting role. That, or becoming the murder victim herself should Miss Kerapalios forestall her with that little trick she said she can do with her tail.

So I am there, two steps behind, when Sherry is closing in on the guilty parties. Miss Kerapalios is not aware of Sherry's presence, being as how she is yelling and cheering and in general egging on Little Nicky in a number of foreign tongues including English, Greek, and Brooklynese. From the look in Sherry's eye things are about to get very ugly indeed.

Now here is the funny part: I am not watching Sherry and Miss Kerapalios any more. Something seems to lay hold of my eyes and drag them over to where Jimmy Delancey is standing. He is shouting instructions to his boy, directing Little Nicky's strategy like a good manager is supposed to do. I have never seen Jimmy at work before. He is not the same schmuck I know. He is a different schmuck altogether. There is a fire in his eyes which makes Miss Kerapalios's personal brand of headlamp sparks look like a firefly next to Krakatoa. Everything he's got, he's got focused on Little Nicky. I get the feeling that if I was to hold my hand out in his general direction he would melt my wristwatch, and such items do not come cheap.

Miss Kerapalios is leaning close to him, but she is not melting. She has got her fingers dug into his shoulders while she is yelling at the fighters for blood. From out the corner of my eye, I see Sherry open up her purse and reach her hand in. I am wondering what she is going after, whether a lipstick or something of a somewhat higher caliber. But I can not spare her more than a wink because of what is happening with Jimmy.

The fight is getting more intense. Little Nicky has got the moves, but he is the challenger and the champ did not get where he is without knowing a few moves of his own. The crowd is roaring. The fighters are hammering each other good. This is not going to be a decision bout, this much even I know.

Jimmy is shouting louder, with Miss Kerapalios almost climbing his back. He is shining like someone mashed all the lights of Coney Island

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into one little man and turned on the juice. Miss Kerapalios has got her claws deeper into him, and I look down in time to see that I win the bet because here comes her snake tail wrapping itself around his legs while the light coming off him flows back into her. I know what I am seeing here, even if no one believes me after. It does not always take a tout to pick a winner, and it does not always take a religious man to know when he has seen a soul.

Then Sherry yanks her hand out of her purse and points something shiny at the two of them. I yell for her to stop, but there is too much yelling going on. Jimmy yells for Little Nicky to jab for the champ's ribs. Miss Kerapalios yells whatever she damn well feels like in Greek. Sherry is yelling too, but so is everyone else ringside, so no one hears my yell for beans.

Only someone sees. Little Nicky is in a clinch with the champ, who has got him turned so that he is looking right at his corner. What he sees there makes his eyes go wide. He pushes the champ off, gives him one wild punch right in the kisser that lays him out sweet and pretty, then runs straight for the turnbuckle. Jimmy is livid. He is screaming louder and louder for his boy to pull back, stop, what the hell is he doing, knock it off, like that. The light around him is glowing hotter and brighter. I see Miss Kerapalios latched onto him and never in my life do I see a dame more happy. The brightness is wrapped around them both and she is swelling up with it like she is a cross between a tick and a lightbulb, her mouth open, her tongue hanging out like she is laying it all down in the home stretch. Jimmy shakes his fists at Little Nicky and Miss Kerapalios's sables are starting to singe, but she does not seem to care.

Neither does Little Nicky. He leapfrogs over the turnbuckle like it's a hydrant on Mulberry Street and he lands on top of Sherry just as there's this big bang and this explosion of light and this smell like fried chicken everywhere and the ref is going nuts and I look around just in time to see Murray kissing Ernestine.

No one ever manages to find Jimmy Delancey or Miss Kerapalios again after that night, not even the Fights Commissioner, which is okay by me as I consider some marriages are made in heaven, but this one was strictly a fire hazard.

Little Nicky loses the championship for leaving the ring without permission, but he is able to earn quite a nice dollar indeed as the manager at Sherry's, without portfolio. I hear rumors as how once he turns twenty-one, Sherry is even going to give him the portfolio, with maybe Father Salvatore there to officialate. Maybe later they will move out to California, but for now Little Nicky is happy enough even though the closest he comes to grapes is in bottles.

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Ernestine renames the G&C Luncheonette the E&M in honor of her and Murray becoming nuptialized. This is fine by her, on account she never knew what G&C were when she bought the place and it is finally time for a change.

I go there a lot and Murray and I rehash old times. The pie is still good and Murray still cannot pick a mudder.

Ploosa shanj, as the Frenchies would put it. And so would I. ●

NEXT ISSUE

New writer **Jim Young** makes a compelling *Asimov's* debut next month with our June cover story, "Microde City." In this one, Young takes us to a complex and dangerous high-tech future where Fashion is Big Business, and where Fashion means changing a *lot* more than your clothes—it means changing your body type *itself*, so that the streets swarm with custom-made gods and werewolves and dinosauroids and Amazons and other marvelous creatures... and where *below* the glitter and the surface glamour a dark secret lurks that could decide the fate of the world.... Our evocative June cover, illustrating "Microde City," is by British artist Chris Moore.

ALSO IN JUNE: hot British writer **Ian McDonald** offers us a harrowing study of just how *bad* racial tension can get when one of those races is from an alien planet, as a young alien woman suffers the dreadful fate of being "The Undifferentiated Object of Desire"; popular writer **James Patrick Kelly** gives us a wry look at Courting and Romantic Love in a future society where simply *everything* depends on "Chemistry"; World Fantasy Award-winner **Tanith Lee,** one of the world's most popular fantasists, takes some questing knights to a meeting with a mysterious destiny in an enigmatic castle, in the darkly lyrical "Winter Flowers"; **Robert Reed** spins a fast-paced tale of a young boy's encounter with greed, obsession, and murder, as well as with a marvel of otherworldly strangeness, in "The Toad of Heaven"; **William John Watkins** returns with an evocative yet powerful little sketch of a "Snow Scene With Frozen Rabbit"; and popular writer **Jessica Amanda Salmonson,** making her prose debut in *Asimov's* (she's had poetry here before), gives us a bittersweet and compassionate look at what it must be like to be "The Toad Witch." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstands on April 27, 1993.

COMING SOON: big new stories by **Nancy Kress, Bruce Sterling, John Kessel, Bruce McAllister,** and many more.

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NEANDERTHAL CRAFTS

They made beautiful things stupidly.

—Pierre Bordes

Having learned to flake flint
to shape a working edge
from a dull stone:
a hand-axe
a knife
a borer
a scraper
a spear point
a saw
a shredder
Neanderthal man must have been pleased
for his tools were Bauhaus-beautiful,
form following function,
and he made the same tools
the same way
in the same pattern
for 50,000 years—
like father like son,
like mother like daughter,
for 250,000 generations,
having not yet invented
fashion.

—David Lunde

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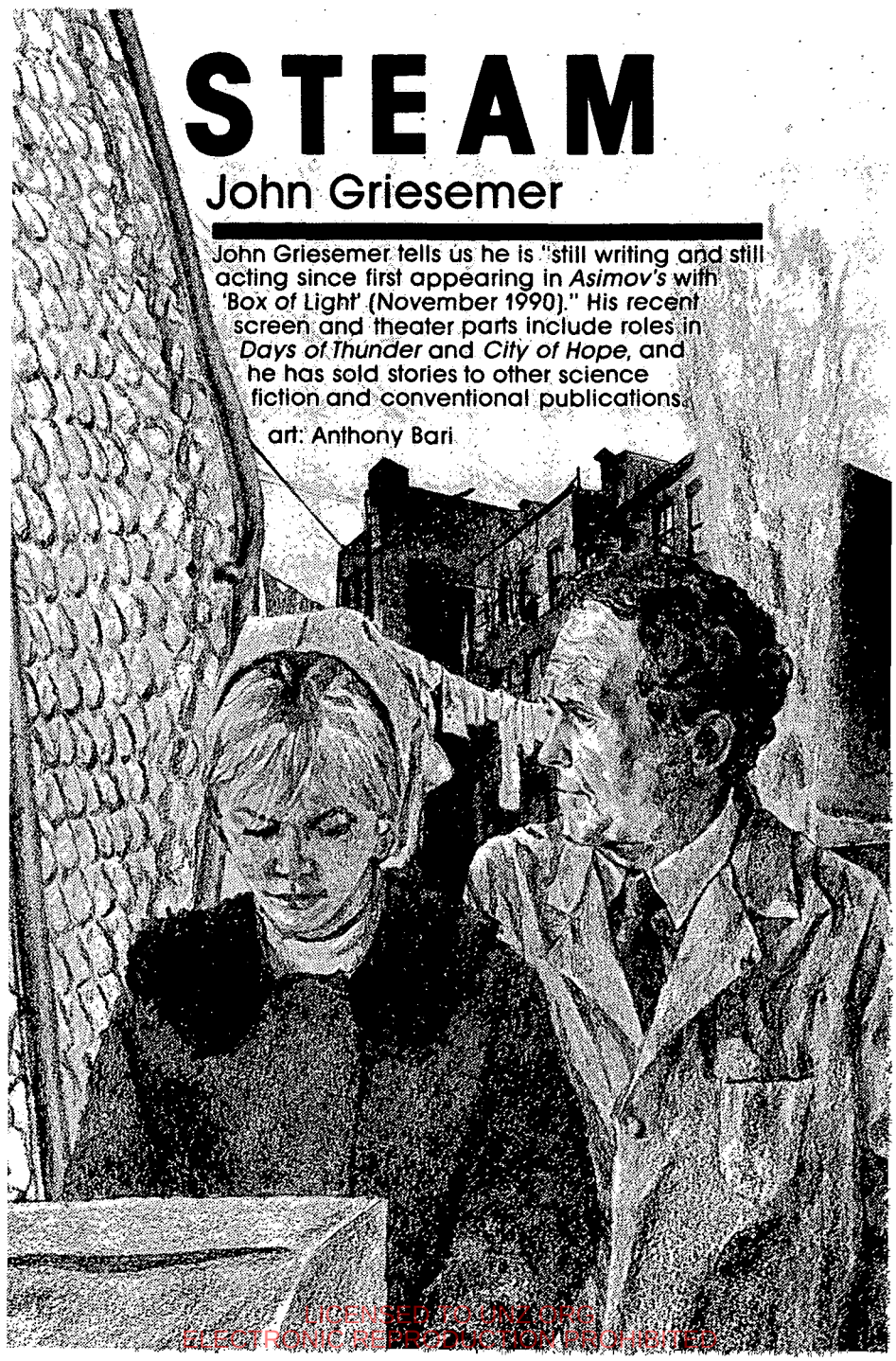
STEAM

John Griesemer

John Griesemer tells us he is "still writing and still acting since first appearing in *Asimov's* with 'Box of Light' (November 1990)." His recent screen and theater parts include roles in *Days of Thunder* and *City of Hope*, and he has sold stories to other science fiction and conventional publications.

art: Anthony Bari



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This romance of mine began as the old pipes beneath us gave way. Love among the explosions. At random the city's streets were bursting open, asphalt and cement tearing outward like flower petals abloom. Flashes of whiteness raged from the hemorrhages. Steam. There had been incidents before—of love and detonations—but nothing like now.

Inspection teams couldn't keep up with the eruptions. Aneurysms of our nineteenth century engineering marvel were striking us down on the cusp of the twenty-first. The Gilded Age was rising from the grave to blow apart in our faces. Who could not fall into a desperate love at such a time?

If you're distant and looking in the right direction when a pipe goes, you'll see manhole covers popping up down the block. Black discs, airborne, flipping like coins. I was five hundred feet from an explosion once on the Upper East Side, and I saw a manhole cover rise and fall back to earth atop a baby carriage. The uniformed nanny was left holding the handles; two hundred pounds of street iron had obliterated the pram by landing as squarely as a well-placed postage stamp.

I'm an archivist of this stuff. My employer, the Institute for Urban Decay, is looking for a pattern, a *meaningful* pattern, of course, an historical context, for the explosions.

But I say the pattern is no pattern. That's the concept our time has refined. We are in the realm of the pure and unfathomable design flaw. That's my risk assessment. It's Endism, babes, and life is full of surprises. At last.

Sometimes decay is so contrary these days it defies all laws. My tooth, for instance. I lose a filling. It pops out while I'm eating yogurt of all things. But nothing hurts. I go to the clinic. Dentist looks in and says, "Not only is there no filling, there's *no need* for a filling. Your tooth has grown back. A perfect bicuspid."

He can't explain it. I can't explain it. I can only think there's a research possibility here, in my mouth, if somebody could come up with the funding.

Growth is contrary too. Farmers in California report crops coming in upside down. Fields full of pale, wan roots reaching skyward, while down in the humus lie the beans, the melons, the broccoli, the corn. The crops seem healthy, bountiful, just *backward*. News pictures of the white tendrils in the sun scare consumers. It looks like acre upon acre of nerve endings out for a tan. No one wants to eat their vegetables anymore. We'd put a researcher on it, but that's not our mandate. We're here for urban decay, and that's why I'm on the steam explosions.

I work in the anchorage of the George Washington Bridge. The IUD got access to the space after the last election. We have six floors built into and around the massive grey stone fortress where the bridge's steel

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cables are anchored. It isn't the most fashionable of intellectual neighborhoods, surrounded as it is by the remnants of a park and the homeless encampments on the bridge's lower level, but it's sturdy, and if the balloon goes up, we'll be in a strong defensible position until we can be airlifted to safety.

But that's looking on the dark side. Sometimes New York can still be downright beautiful. Sometimes you can see the alabaster city's gleam. Sometimes, as I say, you can fall in love.

Cruising down the FDR Drive, I was off to get my car's annual inspection. The IUD is doing a study of the Department of Motor Vehicles. Our Head became fascinated with the DMV's survival. Through all the upheavals of late, the DMV has thrived. Police spend all their time now impounding cars with out-of-date or counterfeit stickers. Tow trucks prowl the streets like bottom-feeders that never sleep. "If it all blows," Our Head says, "we'll still have to drag our cars through the ashes of civilization to get our stickers renewed because we know if we don't, then we'll *really* be in trouble."

He's probably right, Our Head. He usually is. I know what he means. I treasure my car; I want it to go unassailed. So, I was driving early on a fall morning to a garage recommended by the security guy at work. Another establishment beneath another bridge, it's in a bunker under the Williamsburg.

The morning was foggy, but about halfway down the island, the first flares of the sun struck the city. The heat made the mist and clouds unravel. I could see currents and swirls in the sky similar to the tidal rips out on the river. The light, as it came through the vapor, was silver and gold. The sun began to flash from the windows of all the buildings facing east. I broke into song.

Moltano was the mechanic's name. His garage was a cavern on the edge of havoc's precincts. Inside, the constant rumble of bridge traffic gave a vastness to the shadows. There was one large door and a central, grease-covered aisle off of which were brick-walled alcoves. I could see the snub noses of vans and delivery trucks protruding from the darkness. Perhaps they were there for repairs, perhaps for cover during daylight.

Moltano came around a corner humming. He was eating from a container of ice cream. I told him how I'd gotten his name. He nodded and had me drive onto a lift. He said he'd get to my car right after he put a sticker on a sedan that was jacked up next to mine.

"For insurance reasons you'll have to wait there." He pointed with his plastic spoon right behind me to a corral made with brass poles and velvet ropes cast off from some museum. Standing there, in the corral,

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was a woman in a long, gray wool coat with official pale blue epaulets. I recognized her immediately.

"You're the nanny," I blurted.

Her cheeks flushed. She looked down, then to me, confused. She had blonde hair, and her eyelashes were the color of stripped maple. Her abashment smote me, so much so that, heedless of my first outburst, I blundered on and said I'd seen her the day the steam explosion had landed a manhole cover on her pram.

"I don't remember you," she said.

"No, of course not."

"There were—" and I now could detect a slight accent, "—so many people trying to help."

Not I, though, I'd never gotten close. I'd run to a pay phone to punch in data back to the Institute.

"You were one of them?" she asked.

"Well . . . " I said, and she mistook my hesitation for modesty.

"Thank you," she said.

"Car's ready." It was Moltano talking to the woman. She handed him an envelope and climbed into the sedan. The engine whirred, and she was backing out of the bay before I croaked, "Wait!"

But she had the windows rolled up, as every driver on ground level streets must. I whirled around to vault the velvet ropes but hit them instead, bringing the whole fence down with a brassy clang on the garage floor.

"Forget the inspection!" I shouted to Moltano who was over at the hydraulic controls. I scrambled up, jumped into my car and backed it off the lift into about three feet of space. The car came down with a crash, destroying the muffler. I spun a one-eighty on the apron out front and headed thunderously in the direction the woman had gone.

For three lights I held onto her trail then hit a tie-up at a movie shoot. The woman had made it through before police stopped traffic for a crowd of extras and a small *carnaval* parade passing below the camera that was hanging from a crane over an intersection. Motorists were getting out of their cars. I stood on the roof of mine and saw over the swirling, feathered costumes to the cross street where the woman turned off the avenue.

I jockeyed out of the jam and backed down the oncoming lane into the next open intersection. My exhaust system was sending volleys of indictable noise off the tenements and storefronts. I zipped into a side street and, a block down, ran into a detour. Steam rupture repairs. Of course.

As I zig-zagged through a steeplechase of blue saw horses and temporary vent pipes, I waved my access credentials out my window, but in

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my rearview mirror I could see one of the hard hats reaching for his radio.

At a barricade, I had to cut a sharp right and got stuck among tractor-trailers on a downtown freight route. There was no catching the woman now; I was trapped on a limited access semi-tunnel which I was finally able to exit just before it became an enormous cement ditch that bored through the Lower East Side.

Gusts of nervousness and disappointment blew through me. I had to do something about my tail pipe. I skirted a Neighborhood of Color and stopped at an auto parts storefront to pick up some muffler patch. I let the pipes cool and found a broken cardboard box to lie on in the gutter. I went under the car to slather compound on the punctures.

Ten minutes later, as I squirmed back out from beneath the chassis, I saw coming around the corner Our Head with an entourage of Institute folk, foundation dignitaries and a police escort. I practically shot sparks from my shoe heels as I pedalled furiously against the pavement to push myself back under the car.

They walked by, glancing in the window of a *botanica* and letting their security slacken now that they were out of the ethnic danger zone. Bringing up the rear was a cop and a young guy in bib overalls and a bow tie. This was Sterling, a grad student and intern at the Institute for a semester.

I pulled out from under the car and hissed at him. His jaw dropped. Right away he wanted to know what I was doing there. I made up something about a steam explosion.

"I don't recall seeing any on the screens," he said.

"I'm doing background," I said.

"How come you're under your vehicle?"

I showed him the can of muffler patch, then pointed to the entourage.

"So what's the expedition for?" I asked. "Funding junket?"

"You *don't know?*" Sterling had already perfected the Institute gloat for use when disclosing new facts to the uninformed.

A few yards away, the cop on sweep cleared his throat, indicating he wanted Sterling to close ranks. Sterling waved that he'd be right there. He leaned back down to me.

"Outbreaks of magic realism. Seems like the objective correlative has come to life in the *barrio,*" he said. He was bubbling, as if pitching the research proposal even for me. "Reports of tenements full of butterflies, an old woman rising up to heaven. It's like the transcultural milieu, the overcrowding, the shadow economies, the drugs, the recombinant religions have all reached critical mass down here. Now we're getting reports of stuff right out of the Ur-texts of South American lit. This kind

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of data will put us up to speed with those weird yields out on the truck farms of the Central Valley."

I ran my tongue over my tooth. "You get to see any phenomena?" I asked.

"Nah. Talked to witnesses is all. Did see garbage bags full of cocoon casings, though. That was pretty convincing. Probably that'll be the clincher that could get us the grant. You should have been on the tour. In fact, you were supposed to be. Nobody could find you around the office. I should warn you that Our Head was peeved."

"You better catch up to them," I said. "Listen, do me a favor, don't say you saw me down—"

"No sweat," he said, and he slapped the hood of my car to put a button on the scene, but then noticed the windshield sticker and had to add, "Hey, man, you better get this thing inspected."

So, she was gone, and I had lost her. I ditched my car in the Institute garage and buried myself in work. For two weeks I did almost nothing but sleep at the office, eat from vending machines, pursue steam explosions and wallow in data. I had no choice because I needed to win back some points on Our Head's scoreboard. It was treacherous to have missed an Institute funding muster.

Luckily my latest explosion data helped us snag some discretionary funds from the Defense Department, and Our Head seemed satisfied. He memoed me a thanks and said with a properly significant dryness that he was sure a recent report of my vehicular endangerment of a steam recovery crew was probably due only to my zealous investigations on or around the day of the funding tour that I'd been unaccountably unable to attend but that in light of my fine work, bygones would be bygones.

Fine. But throughout my information frenzy and febrile work display, I hadn't forgotten the woman. My buzzing thoughts of meeting and losing her had been a perfect harmonic to the abrasive whine of the employment panic I'd been laboring under.

Then one afternoon in my office door there was a human silhouette with arms upraised in the referee's field goal sign. Sterling, exercising some office semiotics. He stepped into my cubicle. I could see behind him out the foot-thick glass to the bridge where traffic crawled on the upper deck and the cook smoke and tarpaulins of the homeless on the lower level fluttered in the chill.

"Victory," Sterling said. "You won. We have entered The Age of the Assassin with Four Names, and you've got him."

I didn't respond. Outside someone plummeted from the bridge's lower level. It happens. A ragged bedlamite's dive to Home. Our Suicide Increase Department could register it without even leaving their desks.

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Sterling couldn't believe my silence. He'd been assigned, as an intern, to the grunt work of death data management. "I do all the '-cides,' " he once told me. "Sui- , homi- , patri- , fratri- , sorori- , infanti- and uxori- . . . that's wife killing. I'm shy on regi- and vati- . . . that's the killing of a prophet. Which '-cide' are you on?"

Over a few beers once, I'd declared to some of the grad students that we, as a nation, would outgrow our Lee Harvey Oswalds, our James Earl Rays, our Mark David Chapmans and come up with killers with more names. Sterling turned it into a contest.

"It has happened," Sterling said. "And in your bailiwick. Punch it up on your screen, sahib."

I did. The winning ticket was a schoolyard shooting three hours before in the East Sixties. Four dead. Fourteen wounded. Third graders or younger. No known motive. Assailant saved the last round for himself.

"A textbook case except for the name," Sterling said. "A nineteen-year-old former Navy cook. Name of Armand Garcia-Garcia Bulgakov."

"I'm liable to get caught on a technicality," I told him. "The hyphenation."

"We anticipated that," Sterling said. "The ground rules say it counts."

"What's the prize?"

"A keg party in your honor atop the World Trade Center."

"You going over to the scene?"

"Eeeeeew. No way. Not till they clean it up. The guy unloaded a Niner Mike-Mike pistol and a sawed-off shotgun at the jungle gym. He had a grenade launcher that misfired. He gut shot a mime on the basketball court. The mime was there as part of the Artist-In-The-Schools program doing some kind of site-specific performance piece at recess. It's up in the air now as to what the incident will do to arts funding."

I shut off my terminal. "I'll go over for you," I said. "I need to get out."

There was little left but aura at the school. The fire department was coiling its hoses after washing down the playground. The last ambulance had left more than two hours ago. The press had gotten the requisite reaction footage and had gone. The surviving students had been sent home.

I took a couple of Polaroids for Sterling, then just stared for a while at the wet macadam. No one had gone through the chain link fence yet to play basketball or clamber on the equipment or to cut across to the next block, so the playground continued to stand apart from the quotidian with a shrine-like vacancy. A few other people clung as I did to the fence and stared.

The terror and its place condoned abstraction, so when I left I was

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shuffling along dazed. Eventually I looked up and about a block away I saw the uniform, the blonde hair and a new pram. I ran after her.

I came up alongside her and said hello. I introduced myself. "You know, I followed you that day," I said. "From the garage."

"Oh?" she said. She stopped walking. "My name is Nori," she said and extended a hand.

A mean wind cut at us from the east. She pulled her coat tighter and pushed the carriage with one arm. The pram, I noticed, was empty.

"Are you chilly?" I asked. "We could go somewhere. Buy you coffee?"

She said nothing and kept walking. But she smiled.

"How about there?" I pointed across the street. "They've got an atrium."

We found a table among the ficus, unbuttoned our coats and sighed as the warmth reached in. I began chattering about the playground shooting and instantly regretted it. She looked away. I jumped to how hard it is to get a car inspected these days, about what a mess mine was after I'd had a muffler mishap driving away from Moltano's. I reeled like a horse walking on ball bearings. I didn't want to show my desperation of the past couple of weeks, so I veered off into describing my work. But I babbled. I tried to settle down. I asked her if things had been going okay since the explosion. I'd been thinking about her, I allowed, but my data had been incomplete.

"It must have been terrible," I said.

"Well, it's urban decay for you," she said. Reflexively she rocked the carriage and looked away.

I leaned forward and almost whispered. "It wasn't your child in that carriage, was it?"

She looked at me, startled, and gave out a short, rueful laugh. "*My* baby? Oh, no. There wasn't any baby."

"An empty carriage?"

"That's the whole point," she said, and there was something sharp in her voice unsoftened by the pale glow of her eyes.

She had been cruising, she explained, as uniformed nannies without portfolio must. They roam the streets with empty strollers and prams—the totemic tools of their guild—hoping to find temporary work.

"Like taxis," she said.

I was single, I told her. I lived alone. I wasn't familiar with childcare. "So you don't have a steady job," I said, knowing that was a parlous status in our city.

"I did. With an attaché's family, but when the U.N. left, my job went with it. So, I walk the streets."

"You own a car," I said.

"My government's. It was shipped over when I came from Sweden. It

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will be the first thing to go if business doesn't improve. Next will be my care-giver's license and my hostelry access. As you say, decline of services."

"I am sorry to hear this," I said.

"Well," she said, "it's only data. Incomplete at that."

We watched a pair of window washers crawl up the atrium glass until they were higher than the indoor willows and all the panes were clean. She said she ought to go. I found myself looking at her, feeling calm for the first time in weeks. As she looked at me, her eyes welled, certainly not with tears, but with something else, a kind of light or maybe lightness. I left with her.

As we walked, we soon found ourselves near the school yard again. Nori said she had passed by there only a few minutes before the slaughter. "Everything was so normal," she said.

She was several blocks away when it happened, and she heard about it from pedestrians as sirens wailed in and out of the neighborhood. Stunned people coming from the scene stared at her. She said an empty pram had been a grim thing to be pushing at such a time.

We crossed the street. No one as yet had entered the playground. We were before the gate. Wind blew from behind us. The chain link fence and the wall of the school formed an enormous bale of air. I placed my hand on the carriage and steered us through the opening. I heard Nori draw a sudden breath and felt her grip tighten on the handle. She hooked her fingers around mine.

We slowly crossed the deserted macadam diagonally toward the far exit, pushing the empty pram ahead of us. By now the murder was global on all the networks. But here, before us, it had shrunk to nothing. We walked through it, the invisible pyre of children. We walked out the other side. Silent witnesses clung to the fence and watched.

One thing about love, it can ruin irony. I may have once come up with the mordant concept for Sterling's contest, but when the party rolled around, I had no interest in attending. Sterling had wanted an extra big bash because the magic realism funding had come through and he'd been assigned to the project.

I, however, politely declined to go along, turned my back on the flabbergasted looks of Sterling and the others and planned to spend the evening with Nori. We had to decide something.

My car had been destroyed because of a lapsed inspection sticker. I had not gone back within twenty-one days to Moltano, and he turned me in. He figured he'd make more from a turn-in than from an under-the-counter inspection, so he squealed. Our security guy saw the car get

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towed right out from our garage at the bridge. For all I know, he was in on it too.

So, I needed a car. Nori had hers, but maybe not for long. She still hadn't found work. Embassy, Immigration and the DMV were about to get interested. I wanted her to move in with me. I was in a Ford Foundation five-room in Chelsea. She wasn't going to find anything better.

It was dusk, and Nori and I were in my office. She had driven up to give me a ride as she'd been doing often for the past month. Everyone else had gone home or off to the party.

I made the proposal. It was sudden, I knew. But these were accelerating times.

Nori folded her arms and pulled them tightly across her chest. She had held herself the same way against the cold when we met and talked on the street near the playground.

As she leaned against my desk, she thought a moment and then asked me if I thought there was a future for us. A *real* future, one beyond covenants of transport and shelter.

I know that our odds are, at the very least, strange. After all, I am a man who had a rotted tooth grow back.

But I say, "Yes, I do."

"And why?" she asks. This is a catechism. She doesn't ask *what* future. She asks why a future.

I say, "Because I'm here. Because you are. Because of what I saw when I first laid eyes on you. Because the world looks different to me now."

"How?" she wants to know.

"I'm in it. At last."

"You are?"

"*We* are."

And so we hold each other in the shadow of the bridge. Dusk moves up the river. The light deepens. We can see by the ramps that traffic on the upper deck has come to a halt. A tie-up. Data terminals in the office change their timbre. New information concerning the city is coming in. Over Nori's shoulder I can see on my screen disruptions around the grid. Now we know where we're headed. This woman and I reach under each other's clothes. We are privileged, I think. We are privileged and fortressed. But the world is pouring in through a crack in this fortress because of what we are doing here. Revocations are made of this.

"Yes," Nori says, and I answer likewise. We sink to the carpet where terminal cables run under the pile. We shed our clothes and take each other into each other knowing the result will be patternless, could defy all norms.

Outside, on the bridge, a naked figure leaps from the lower level. Faces appear at the rail then disappear back among the girders and darkness,

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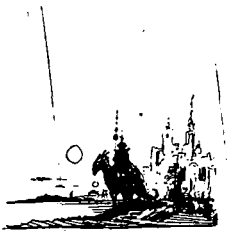
drained of curiosity. Steam bursts. The tarps on the bridge flutter. The rags and plumes are banners. The wind, blank and odorless because it comes from the north where the wealthy lie tonight, is an anthem.

As the printers zing across the white pages on desks all around us, Nori and I hunger. It is senseless, I am thinking. It must be that the city was put here to fall apart. We are of its design and also its design flaw. The naked plummet. Steam rises. And I can tell it will mean love for us and risk without end. ●



CLARION 1993

The twenty-sixth Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop will be held at Michigan State University from June 20 to July 31, 1993.

Clarion is the oldest and most successful writing workshop in the science fiction and fantasy field. Over a third of its graduates have published since leaving Clarion. They include in their number Ed Bryant, Lucius Shepard, George Alec Effinger, Octavia Butler, Kim Stanley Robinson, Vonda McIntyre, and Spider Robinson.

Writers-in-Residence for Clarion '93 will be Tim Powers, Joe Haldeman, Karen Fowler, Eleanor Aranson, Kate Wilhelm, and Damon Knight.

Deadline for applications is April 15. For forms or more information, call or write:

Jennifer Banks, Director c/o Mary Sheridan Clarion '93 Lyman Briggs School Michigan State University East Lansing, MI 48825-1107 Phone: (517) 353-7196 FAX: (517) 336-2758.

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art: Steve Cavallo

THE EARTH IS ON THE MEND

David Marusek

The author hitchhiked to Alaska a month after graduating from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1973. Except for two years of study and travel in Europe and the Middle East, he's lived there ever since. Mr. Marusek now resides with his daughter in a cabin that is in the woods on the edge of Fairbanks. He is a 1992 graduate of the Clarion West Workshop, and "The Earth is on the Mend" is both a Clarion story and his first sale.

The old man in the squirrel-pelt parka stopped to pull the club from his belt. The malemute, harnessed to the small sled, stopped behind him. The man stepped off the trail and wallowed through deep snow to the thicket of scrub willow. The dog, mindful of her traces, tamped snow underfoot, made one tight circle, and lay down. Before she could nap, the man returned with a frozen snowshoe hare. "Three!" he said to the dog. "What does that mean, eh?" He scratched the dog behind an ear. "It means the Earth is on the mend, it does. And what does the dog say to that?" The dog stood up and wagged her tail. "I see," said the old man, "the dog says this time you'd better not piss it all away."

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* * *

The next snare lay alongside the trail. The hare was still alive. It huddled calmly at the end of its tight necklace. "Four," whispered the old man as he stepped slowly next to it. "Ah, little bunny," he crooned, "we came quick as we could." The hare stared with bright brown eyes. "And what does the bunny say?" The man raised his club. "The bunny says, 'I know; I know. Just do it.' "

Black spruce trees teetered drunkenly under the load of snow. The land beneath the ridge lay in shadow. There, on the white expanse of a frozen lake, moved a black shape. "A moose?" said the old man. "Nah, dream on." He studied the shape's movements. "A man!"

He led the dog down to a rocky promontory overlooking the lake, careful not to break cover. He watched the man push a mound of snow off a fishing hole, chip away the new ice lens, and check the line. Empty. "It's a fisherman who wears a bearskin parka," he told the dog. "Nice mukluks, too."

The next hole was near their hiding place, so the old man put his arm around the dog's neck and stroked her muzzle. "I thought we checked this lake," he whispered into her ear. After a minute he added, "We did. It's dead." When the fisherman pulled a long, black fish out of the hole, the old man craned to see. "Lingcod," he whispered. "My oh my."

The fisherman checked fifteen more holes, adding another fish to his catch before leaving the lake. It was dusk when the old man led the dog to the nearest hole. He cleared it and pulled up the line. The line was made from sinew, except for the leader which was a yard of monofilament. He showed it to the dog. "Look at this, will you. And this." The hook was made of stainless steel and baited with a quarter trout. "Dolly Varden." He dropped the line back into the hole, changed his mind, and pulled it up again. "Don't you dare tell anyone," he said, as he removed the bait, bit off a mouthful, and tossed the remainder to the dog.

The fisherman's trail weaved among snow-choked hills. When darkness fell, the old man let the dog lead the way. The smell of woodsmoke told him they were near.

The hut was built of poles and caribou skins and heaped with earth. A wannigan of arched snow blocks served as entrance. The old man stashed the sled behind a pair of birch trees not far from this entrance and unharnessed the dog. He fastened his parka and hood and sat on the sled. The dog curled up at his feet. After an hour or so, the moon came out and revealed the yard in pale light. There were drying racks and two small outbuildings. There was a food cache slung between two giant white spruce. There was a woodpile and chopping block. Two pairs of

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skis leaned against the wannigan. Every now and then a voice or laugh could be heard from inside the hut. "That means he's not alone," said the old man.

He led the dog on a tour around the hut. There were no tracks behind it and, as best as he could tell, no back door. There was no dog yard or sign of dog. One of the outbuildings had a door with leather hinges. Inside were old tools: a shovel, a scythe, axes, a bow saw, and more. There were coils of rope, piles of caribou hide, and a crate of metal scraps. "Clearly, he's a man of wealth and industry," said the old man. "But who invited him? I didn't. Did you?" He eased the door shut. "He's got to go, I think. At least that's my take on the situation. What does the dog say to that? The dog says it's that whole resource management thing all over again."

Someone came out of the hut, a woman leading a child by the hand. The old man and dog stood still and watched as she helped the child pee in the snow next to the wannigan. The woman laughed. She sent the child back into the hut, then squatted in the same spot, peed quickly and hurried back inside.

"Did you see that?" said the old man. "A family. Did you see it? What a tragedy. What a shame." He went back to the sled and pulled a carbine from under the cover. "We don't have many rounds left. I was saving them for something big we could eat." He pulled off his hood and overmitts. He cracked his knuckles. "Then again, maybe we should sleep on it. What does the dog say?"

The dog's ears went erect, and she snuffled the air. "What is it?" said the old man. Then he smelled it too, a new odor mixed with the woodsmoke. "Jesus," he cried, "cod skin on a hot griddle, getting all crisp and wonderful." He sat down on the sled. "Yes, and long, fat slabs of cod liver just dripping with oil. Dripping big greasy drops of oil." He stood up. "I've made up my mind." He returned the carbine to the sled and reached for the game sack.

The old man stood in front of the wannigan. "Hello, the house," he shouted. When there was no reply, he shouted again, "Hello, the house." Then he heard a click next to him. The fisherman was aiming a pistol at his head from ten paces. The dog growled. "*Now* she growls," said the old man. To the fisherman he said, "Where'd you pop up from?"

The fisherman said, "Put your hands where I can see them."

"Glad to oblige." The old man spread his arms out. In each hand he held a snowshoe hare. "I make damn good company," he said. "What do you say to that?" ●

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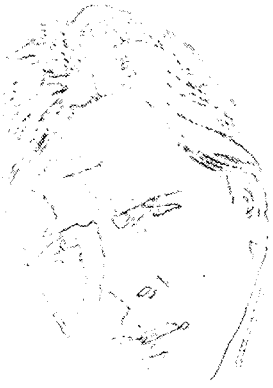
The author has a new story exists now. Many of my short pieces are with my Dry Lands stories and asked why we didn't simply make icebergs or water. Well, yes, said. We could do that, but simply the climate keeps drying out, perhaps ice rights will be more important than mineral rights at some future Antarctic treaty negotiation. It's a scary thought. Del Rey has just released Ms. Rosenblum's first novel, The Dry Lands, and she is working on the sequel.

art. Steve Cavallo



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Almost dawn, and the storm had finally ended. Waiting for the pickup copter, Escher yawned and leaned back against the winch chair. The wind had died, and the mist rising from the berg beneath his boots chilled him to the marrow of his bones. The storm had been short but bad. Waves breaking against the sheer sides of the iceberg had sent spray clear over the rim. His monitors had gone wild with stress codes, but fortunately, none of the harness cables had snapped. After all their months of slow northward travel, the berg surfaces were slushy and unpredictable. Cables could drop into a rotten pocket and break, or insulation could tear loose from the bottom and foul the harness-mounted propeller blades.

Something like that could delay the ice-train's arrival at the LA terminal. Escher didn't want any delays. He'd spent nearly two years making the circle from LA to Argentina, down to the Ross Sea and slowly slowly back. Yesterday was waiting for him on the LA docks.

He hoped.

Up ahead, barely visible in the mist, birds wheeled and shrieked above the ghostly bulk of C berg. A gust of wind—a last breath of the vanished storm—parted the mist momentarily, giving Escher a clear view to the east. On the horizon, the rising sun bled color into the sky, silhouetting the distant spires of the Los Angeles skyline. So close, and so completely out of reach. It had hovered there for days now, tantalizing him until he thought he'd go crazy as the twenty-kilometer train of harnessed bergs inched its slow way to its offshore moorage.

He had spent his whole life waiting to set foot on that shore again. All two years of it. Escher shivered in the cold fog. Los Angeles; "the Angels" in Spanish. *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula,* the Town of Our Lady, the Queen of the Angels of Porciuncula. He had looked up its history in the train's library. He had spent a lot of hours in the library as the ice-train crept northward from 70°S, looking at street maps, travel guides, anything and everything that mentioned LA, or had even one picture of the city.

Looking for his name. Looking for echoes from his vanished past.

The mist closed in again, cold and damp on his neck, hiding the city towers. The hospital had slapped a personal lien on him for payment after the accident, so he had signed onto the berg train. He had figured it would give him two years to remember. . . .

Escher lifted his head as the racket of the pickup copter blotted out the sound of seabirds and water. Loud and overhead, it was as if the mist had sucked up the sound until it was saturated, had spilled the excess suddenly down on Escher's head like a wrung-out sponge. Fog shredded as the copter descended, battered away by the blast from the rotors. Escher sprinted bent-over for the door.

Rosanna, his relief, had already hopped out. "All green?" she yelled over the beat of the rotors.

"No problem. The rest of the train okay?"

"We're still moving. I think." Rosanna waved and headed for the winch shack, her lunch cooler swinging.

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Karen, coming in from the number two winch shack on C berg, leaned out, offering a hand. "If we aren't moving, I'm going to get out and push."

Escher grabbed her wrist and swung himself onboard just as the copter lifted. Trujillo never quite touched the skids to the ice on pickup. "Took you long enough," Escher yelled forward.

Trujillo shook his comm-helmeted head, and lifted his shoulders in an elaborate shrug.

"Not his fault." Karen shook back her sandy hair, yelling over the roar of the blades. "Ron broke his leg up on B, so Arturo got stuck with an extra run."

"Poor bastard." Escher settled himself against the wall. "Bad timing." He had a wife and a kid waiting for him somewhere way up north. "What happened?" he asked.

"Backlash from a broken harness cable." Karen grimaced. "It was just secondary—the boss says it won't hold us up."

"S'what he gets for fakin' his probes." Jamie, from winch shack 3 on C berg, yawned. "Man, I got a date with hot chicks and major booze on shore. If I got to, I'll *swim* in."

"Ron does his probes. Why don't you *do* something with your money this time?" Karen squeezed over to make room for Escher between the wall-mounted stretchers and the orderly tangle of the hoist. "Party it all away, and you'll just end up back here for a third trip."

"So? Better than throwin' it away on a bunch of dust." Jamie winked at her. "Nah, I got some plans. *I* won't be back again. You'll see."

"We're not throwing it away." Karen tossed her head. "All that land needs is a new soaker-hose system, and this'll buy it for us. And no, I won't be back here. Not on your life." Her eyes flashed, "We're going to make it, Randy and I."

"Sure you are."

Escher listened with half an ear, not really part of this conversation. Ever since the ice train had begun to brake for mooring, the crew could talk about nothing but the lives they'd left behind. Now that LA had appeared on the horizon, all he heard was a constant babble about lovers, family, friends, getting back, going on, picking up the lives they'd left behind two years ago. . . . None of it applied to him.

"You look sad." Karen leaned over, her lips close to his ear. "Everything'll be okay. You'll get off the train, and all of a sudden you'll remember. I *know* it's going to happen like that."

"Yeah, he'll remember he's some heavy duty killer, or the feds are after him." Jamie grinned. "Me, I think he's already remembered it, and doesn't want to tell us. How 'bout it, Escher? You a mass murderer?"

"No." Escher kept a tight grip on his temper. "Sorry to disappoint you."

"Yeah?" Jamie's eyes gleamed. "If you can't remember, how do you know?"

"Shut up," Karen flared. "Just shut *up*, Jamie."

"I just know." Escher clamped his lips together, tired of Jaime's needling, two whole fucking years of it. If he'd done anything, the cops

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would've had his prints on file. They'd sure checked. Still. . . Jamie was right. He *didn't* know.

"You couldn't hurt anyone," Karen reached over and took his hand. "I know you. You couldn't do it."

Escher squeezed her hand, gratefully. Maybe it would happen the way Karen said. He'd set foot on shore and *bam*, he'd have a past, a life.

Maybe. He grabbed for a handhold as Trujillo banked the copter and elevator-dropped down to the deck of the crew ship in the lee of G berg. Jamie spat out a curse.

"Hey, don't complain." Karen scrambled to her feet. "Arturo picked you up out of the Ross before you even got cold, that time you went over while we were wrapping the bergs. Let's go get some breakfast. I'm starved."

Trujillo vaulted back into the sky as they crossed the *Western Star's* deck. Escher stumbled, needing a few moments to adjust to the crewship's roll after the rock-stable berg, and Karen dropped back to keep pace with him.

"Don't let Jamie get to you." She put a hand on his arm. "You're who you are—that doesn't change just because you don't remember your eleventh birthday. At least you're not stuck on C berg with him." She rolled her eyes. "I was about ready to shove him over, yesterday. God, what a *prick*."

"Yeah, he's that." Escher said it with more heat than he'd intended, and turned away quickly, pretending to study the towering bulk of G berg.

It towered over them like a white mountain, trailing a veil of cold mist on the morning breeze. The silvery film of the mylar insulation layer that protected the underside of the bergs glittered like silver along the waterline, quilted to the berg's frozen bottom by a network of cables. Gulls and terns shrieked and dove along its flanks. Herring gull, sooty tern, black tern. . . he'd learned to identify all the species from the library, had learned habits and names of the penguins, the leopard seals, the whales and dolphins; every animal or bird he had spotted on the trip. Sometimes, he felt driven, as if his head was a vacuum, and if he didn't fill it up with *something*, it might implode.

Or was he trying to bury what was already there?

"What if he's right?" Escher asked slowly. "What if there's a reason why I can't remember?"

"There *is* a reason. You got a concussion, remember?" Karen peered into his face. "From hitting your head. You're really worried, aren't you?"

"Not *worried* exactly." Escher touched his head lightly, fingering the faint trace of the scar where his head must have hit the curb. *No organic damage*, the bored clinic doctor had told him. *Functional amnesia. Your memory should return eventually. Just give it time.* "It's like a blind date." He followed her down the companionway, their footsteps ringing on the converted factory-ship's metal stairway. "It's a blind date with myself.

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There's a man out there, and I'm him, but I don't know him." He laughed, heard the tension in it. "I don't think I'm a mass murderer, anyway."

"Forget Jamie." Karen smiled up at him. "You'll like your blind date just fine, Escher. I know I do. Come on, I'm starved." She grabbed his hand. "I bet they've got cinnamon rolls this morning. They always make cinnamon rolls after a storm."

She was right about the rolls. (And about the man he'd meet on shore?) The crew mess was steamy with cinnamon-smell. They loaded their trays with scrambled eggs and the big, fragrant breads. A buzz of conversation filled the long room as they carried their trays to an empty table. The ice-crews ate in here. The ship's crew—Portuguese mostly—ate elsewhere. Captain Watanabe ate in his cabin. He was Japanese, directly employed by the Tanaka corporation, which held the world monopoly on iceberg transport.

Escher concentrated on the scrambled eggs that weren't really eggs, but were soy protein grown in fields irrigated by melted bergs—like the fields Karen wanted to farm. The bergs beat back the Dry. Had he read this in the library, or picked it up on shipboard? Escher laid down his fork, trying to remember, wondering why it was important suddenly, to know where he had learned every last fact.

Because he was listening for whispers. From yesterday. From LA, out there on the horizon. He held his breath, heard only the tired, excited voices around him.

"I told Dad that I'd take a bus up to the valley when I got in." Karen pulled her roll into sticky halves. "But I bet Randy'll hitch down to meet me. He'd do that, and his mom'll shit." She hid her smile in a huge bite of roll. "I can't wait to see him," she said around a mouthful of bread. "Last letter, he said we can close the deal for that land as soon as I get up there."

"I hope it really works out." Escher summoned enthusiasm for her. "I hope the two of you have the best farm in the whole northwest." He put down his fork, suddenly needing to get away from her happy plans. "I'm tired. Maybe I'll head off to bed."

"Me, too." Karen stuffed the last of her roll into her mouth and picked up her tray.

Her cabin was on the deck below his. She paused in the stairwell, leaning close. "Do you want to come down to my room for awhile? Ellie's out on shift, and I'm too tired to go to sleep yet."

He looked into her blue eyes, desire stirring. Randy hadn't seemed very real down in the freezing twilight of 70°S. Death had been real—crewmembers died in the black, freezing water, or from the backlash of a breaking harness cable. Loneliness had been real, and there had been a lot of comfort in their lovemaking. Since they'd sighted the California coast, she had talked about Randy every day, and they hadn't made love.

I'm fading. Escher felt a chill breath on his neck. Randy was real. Escher, who had existed only on the ice-train, was a shadow with no real

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substance. In a few days, Escher would be a memory to Karen, and maybe. . . to himself, the real self who had lived for some twenty-three years before Escher was born. No, he thought, tasting fear. I'm the same man. Karen's right, I just don't *remember*. "I better get some sleep," he said.

"Okay." Karen looked at him for a long moment, then touched his hand lightly. "Sleep well then."

Escher climbed the stairs slowly, tired, but not ready to sleep yet. So near, that city, that blind date. The low wattage bulbs streaked the narrow corridor with dim shadow. Somewhere out there, in the crowded streets and refugee camps of Los Angeles, people remembered him, knew his name, and wondered what had happened to him. I'll remember, he thought as he let himself into his tiny cabin. Karen was right. He'd hit LA, and it would all come back. He could feel it, just out of reach, but so *close*. Yesterday. He closed the door behind him. The two bunks crowded him, neatly made, empty. No pictures on the tiny desk, no personal clutter. You could barely tell that someone lived here. Escher tossed his jacket onto the chair and stripped off his pullover.

"Escher?" A fist pounded on his door. "You there?" Walsh's voice. Escher pulled the door open, wondering what the ice-crew super wanted with him.

"Yo, Escher. Got a bunkmate for you." Light from the overheads glistened on Walsh's hairless scalp. "We picked this guy up out of the water. Captain says to put him somewhere, and you got space."

"Hi." A slender blond-haired man in his late teens or early twenties stepped out from behind the super's wide bulk. "I'm Zachary Odell."

Escher stiffened, seeing another face in his mind; a blond, kid in his late teens, with a face full of judgment. *You're scared,* he said. *You're running out on us.*

As Escher reeled with its impact, the vision popped like a soapbubble, vanished.

Memory.

"Hey, Escher." Walsh peered at him. "You okay?"

"Fine." He was talking to *me*, Escher thought wildly. *Who?* "Hi. . . hello." Escher stuck out his hand to the stranger, struggling to bring the vision back, to remember *more*. "I don't know you, do I? No, no, I guess I don't." He shook his head, a little dazed.

"Odell went overboard off this seiner." Walsh gave Escher a wary glance. "You sure you're all right, huh? Okay, he's yours till we anchor. Keep him out of trouble." He turned abruptly, and stalked back down the hall.

Escher looked after him, realizing belatedly that Walsh was nervous. In two years, he had never seen *anything* rattle the super—not even when a snapping cable had taken Roberto's leg off while they were harnessing the bergs. He turned his attention back to the stranger, still numb from that bombshell instant of memory. "So come in. You get the

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top bunk." He stared around at the narrow space, picked up his pullover. "Did you eat breakfast yet?"

"Yeah." Zachary tossed a blanket roll onto the top bunk. "In sick-bay."

"Sick-bay?"

"I was in the water for awhile. You're Escher, huh?" Zachary shrugged skinny shoulders. "Willy found this book about a guy named Escher. In a house out in the Dry. He was some kind of artist—drew these weird pictures, hands that were birds if you looked at them right, and that kind of stuff. Willy figured we could get something for the book. You related to this artist guy?"

"No." Escher tossed his pullover onto the floor of the tiny closet. "I woke up in this hospital bed and I couldn't remember my name. One of his pictures was hanging on the wall."

It had been the first thing he had seen, and he had stared at it for a long time, clinging to it like a lifeline as he struggled in a sea of confusion. Tiny figures had marched round and round an endless stairway. By some trick of the artist's pen, they seemed to be going up and down at the same time. *John Doe is kind of an overused name,* the nurse with the freckles had said to him, later. *Why don't you pick something else until you remember?* So he had looked for the artist's name on the picture. "It's borrowed," he said. "Until I remember my own name." The print was in his desk drawer; a present from the nurse when he'd been discharged.

Who was he—that blond kid with the face full of judgment? Friend? Brother? Enemy? "Who's Willy? How did you end up in the water?" Escher asked absently.

"Willy's my friend. Carl tossed me overboard."

"What?" Escher blinked.

"Denny threw me the lifejacket." Zachary perched himself on the corner of the desk, pushing aside the little electric clock. "I liked Denny. I'm sorry he drowned."

Escher stared at him, all echoes of his vision gone now. "Someone pushed you *overboard?* Are you serious?"

"Yeah." Zachary grimaced. "I have these dreams, okay? And when I wake up, I talk about 'em. I can't help it. I'm not really awake yet. . . so it just comes out." He ducked his head, peering warily through the sun-bleached fringe of his hair. "Anyway, I guess I talked about the *Mary Anne* going down, and made it real clear that they were all gonna drown, and I guess Carl got pissed. He was third mate, and he didn't like me much anyway."

Escher closed his mouth with an effort. "He tried to kill you because of a *dream?*"

"They always come true." Zachary stood up suddenly, his posture sullen, full of challenge. "It bugs people. Doesn't it bug you?"

Oh, God, a crazy, and Walsh had struck him in here. He didn't need this, not now, not when he was starting to remember. "Look, I got some errands to run." Maybe he could catch Jamie before he crashed, bribe him to take this guy off his hands. He had bunk space. Jamie wouldn't

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do shit for him as a favor, but he'd been losing at poker for the last month. He'd do it for money. Escher grabbed his pullover from the closet, thrust his arms into the sleeves. "I got something to do. I'm coming off shift, so I'm about ready to hit the bed, but I'll give you the five-cent tour when I get back."

No answer. Escher turned around. Zachary lay curled on Escher's bunk, eyes closed, out cold. Shit. Escher dropped to his knees, groping for a pulse. It was there, strong and steady, and Zachary was breathing regularly. Frowning, Escher touched his eyelid. It twitched, and Zachary gave a brief, soft snore. Asleep? Escher let his breath out in an exasperated rush, acutely aware of his own exhaustion as the adrenaline drained from his system. Hell, Jamie would already be asleep. Escher yawned, jaws cracking. Catch him at shift-change. He stripped to his underwear, made up the upper bunk and crawled between the sheets, falling asleep before his head hit the pillow.

He dreamed about the blond kid, only he wasn't a kid, Escher had been wrong. He was older, closer to Escher's age. He had his arms around Escher like a lover, body pressed so close that Escher could feel the hard jut of his ribs beneath his shirt. His face was turned up to Escher's and his eyes were open very wide in his tanned face. He looked so surprised. Escher looked down, saw the knife sticking out of the guy's stomach. He was holding it, and the sticky blood ran over his knuckles, dripping from his wrist in thick, red drops. . . .

Escher bolted upright in darkness, throat aching, cramped hard and tight with a thorny grief he could neither swallow nor vomit up. Oh God, he had killed, he had killed. . . .

Gone.

It had been there. Who this guy was, what he had *meant*. Right there, so everyday close that he could touch it, call it up with a single casual thought. And now, just like that, it wasn't. Below him, Zachary snored softly. Dreaming the dreams that he said always came true? Escher shivered, angry suddenly, because dreams were illusion and everybody knew it, they didn't predict the future or the past. In the two years since he'd awakened in the hospital, he had never remembered a single dream. Until now. Until Zachary.

"I didn't kill him," he whispered to the darkness. He *knew* that, could feel it in his flesh, his bones. It was a nightmare, a nasty twist of his psyche, because LA was so close. It wasn't real. Escher spread his fingers, feeling no blood, no stickiness, just the smooth dry stretch of skin. *You couldn't hurt anyone.* Karen's voice, whispering in his ear. Talk to Jamie, first thing in the morning. Get this crazy out of here. Escher closed his hand into a fist, shoved it under the covers and tried to go back to sleep.

It took him a long time.

"Why not?" Escher scowled through the window as Trujillo whipped the copter off the *Star's* deck. "It's just for a few days."

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"Not on your life, baby." Jamie's grin bared a mouthful of cheap backstreet crowns. "Didn't you hear? Man, he was babbling all over sick-bay about how his boat, the *Mary Anne,* went down in the storm, and everyone drowned except him. And yeah, she went all right—one of those refitted vacuum-seiners that shouldn't be out on anything bigger than a fish pond anyway. Rosalee was on the radio, and she told me Coast Guard's still looking for the crew, but not very hard, if you get me. Trick is, she went down *after* the E berg crew spotted him, and doc says he'd been in the water for awhile. But he *knew* she was gonna go down, and how could he know, huh? You get to keep him, baby."

"Oh, give it a rest." Karen had been humming to herself, but now she gave Jamie a disdainful look. "What? You think he sank her himself, or something?"

"Go ahead, laugh." Jamie shot her a sullen glance. "Maybe he's a fortune teller, huh? Maybe he'll read Escher's palm and tell him his real name. Better hope he doesn't tell you you're gonna fall off the berg and break your neck."

"Shut up." Escher watched twenty kilometers of harnessed, frozen water spin slowly beneath them as Trujillo banked the copter. He'd ducked Zachary this morning, waking first and sneaking off to breakfast, and to hell with Walsh. Dreams were illusion, and he had enough to handle without a crazy.

"Randy called." Karen nudged him. "I don't know *where* he got the money for it. He said he's leaving today, to hitch down here. I *knew* he'd do it," she said happily.

"Yah, there's no future in dust." Jamie made as if to spit. "You'll be back on the bergs in a year, you'll see."

"Not me." Karen tossed her head. "Never, no way. How 'bout you, Escher?" She squeezed his arm. "You're not going to sign on again, are you?"

"Might be a good place to be when you finally remember what you did, huh Escher?"

"Shut the hell up, Jamie!" His yell startled all of them, himself included. Escher clamped his lips together, avoiding Karen's surprised eyes as Trujillo dropped down to D berg. "Look, I didn't sleep well." He scrambled to his feet. "I'm sorry." He swung down to the ice without looking back.

"All green." Ross, coming off shift, boosted himself onboard. "Have a fun day." He grinned and winked.

What was *that* supposed to mean? No time to ask. Karen was peering out the hatch, worrying about him. Escher sprinted away as Trujillo bounced up into the air, pretending not to notice. Slush splattered his legs, ice cold, but not cold enough to cool the anger in his gut. Jamie was an ass.

Yeah, but would he have lost his temper, before the dream? Did he maybe think Jamie was right? Escher wiped his hand on his waterproof coverall, remembering the warm, slightly sticky feel of blood on his

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fingers. It had felt so real. So what? So he'd had blood on his hand sometime in his life. Big deal.

It was a dream. Just *drop* it.

He hunched his shoulders and stomped down the trampled path to the aft winch shack. Berg D was one of the smaller bergs in the huge train. It didn't have any propeller blades harnessed to it—was towed by C or pushed by E, take your choice—a passive white whale with its belly wrapped in silver foil. Walsh only put one crewmember at a time on D, because he got a bonus for shaving the overhead. This morning, Escher was grateful for his solitude. The winch-shack door stood ajar. Ross was getting careless. Escher shoved it open and halted, staring.

"Hi." Perched on a corner of the monitor console, Zachary grinned. "I didn't feel like hanging around your cabin all day."

"How the *hell* did you get out here?" Escher slammed the door.

Zachary flinched. "I got a ride." He swung one foot with the quick, nervous flick of a cat's tail. "I couldn't find you, so I asked these two women where you were. They were heading out in a boat to check the waterline, or propellers, or something. I told them that the supervisor had assigned me to help you, but I'd sort of lost you." Green flecks glinted in his hazel eyes. "Anyway, one of them said you'd be out here, and they gave me a ride. I climbed up the cables. These icebergs are really *big*."

"You climbed the *cables?*" Escher scanned the monitors, but this wacko didn't seem to have touched anything. All green. Ross had left another "have fun" joke in the log. Oh. So *that's* what he'd meant. Zachary. Escher logged in, scowling. "Climbing cables is a stupid stunt. If you don't know your way around, you can fall. Nice way to break your back or your neck."

"That's what one of the women said. I told her I'd worked bergs before. Maybe I did." Zachary swung himself down from the desk and peered at the main monitor screen. "What do the numbers mean?"

Crazy, crazy, crazy, and Jamie wouldn't take him. He'd never dreamed, not once, before Zachary had showed. "They're stress readouts," he said tightly. "From sensors on the harness cables, and the net that holds the bottom insulation in place. The winches have to keep them tight, or everything slides around."

"And the icebergs get smaller as they melt." Zachary was nodding. "So you got to keep pulling them tighter. Neat trick." He shot Escher a quick, sideways look. "How'd you lose your memory?"

"Head injury." Escher did a quick check on the bank of automatic winches, wishing he hadn't mentioned his amnesia last night. "I got hit by a truck." Only he'd never had any symptoms of brain damage. That's what the doctor had meant when he'd talked to him. That there wasn't any reason for him to not remember. The blond kid had looked so *surprised*. "Look, I've got to run a visual on the cables and the forward winches." He fished in the locker for a set of boot spikes and a probe. "You'd better come along." No way he'd leave this guy in here unsupervised. He scowled. "Get your butt off that cable before the winches kick on."

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Zachary slid down, not particularly concerned, then followed Escher out onto the ice. The breeze had died, and the mist had thickened again. "So how come they couldn't find out who you were?" The fog muffled his words and the splat of this footsteps in the slush. "Didn't they take fingerprints or something?"

"Prints and DNA samples. So I'm not a criminal." And it was just a nightmare. He hadn't murdered anybody. "And I didn't have any ID on me, because someone stripped me clean before the ambulance got there." Or he'd gotten away with a murder. Escher hunched his shoulders and walked faster. "Do you know how many people there *are* in the LA area? You got Ice Town and the refugee camps, too." Everyone ended up in LA—all the drifters, the homeless, the dispossessed refugees from the dying Drylands—drawn by the scent of water.

Escher's skin prickled suddenly, because yeah, he'd read it all in the library, but *this*, this echo of thirst and despair and desperate hope, was different. More memory? They had reached the windward edge of the berg. The harness had worn a deep grove into the rim of the ice. Meltwater ran along the woven-mesh cable, trickling down the berg-flank in a tiny waterfall.

"What about your dreams?" Zachary squatted beside the cable. "Maybe you dream about who you were."

"I don't dream." Escher stuck the probe into the ice along the groove. Solid. "Get back from the edge."

"Everyone dreams." Zachary looked up at him, eyes glittering, running his fingers through the icy fall of meltwater. "How come you're pissed at me? I either scare people or they think I'm crazy. But you're pissed."

Because you made me dream. Which couldn't be true, and the dream didn't matter anyway. Escher stabbed the probe into the rim again, nearly lost his balance as it sank deeply into the berg. "Rotten ice here." He yanked the probe free. "I told you to get back from that edge."

No answer. Zachary lay in the slush, curled into a tight fetal ball. No *way* asleep, not this time. Escher jammed the probe into the ice and dropped to his knees, feeling for a pulse. As in the cabin, Zachary's pulse was strong, and he breathed easily. Cold seeped through Escher's coverall, making his knees ache."Wake up." Escher shook him. "Zachary?" His head lolled. Escher scooped up a palmful of slush, pressed it against Zachary's cheek. He mumbled incoherently, but he didn't snap out of it. Something was very wrong. Escher reached for his comm link, swearing under his breath because he'd catch hell from Walsh for letting this guy come out here, never mind that he *hadn't* let him. As he clicked it on, Zachary twitched and opened his eyes.

"They killed her," he whimpered. His white-ringed eyes fixed themselves on Escher's face in a glazed, unseeing stare. "She knew they were there, but she just kept on walking. Why didn't she *run?*"

"Hey, wake up." Escher scooped up another handful of slush.

This time, Zachary flinched away from the cold. "Knock it off." He

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slapped at Escher's hand, eyes focusing suddenly. "That *hurts*, man. I just fell asleep, okay?"

"Like hell." Escher peered at his eyes. Zachary's pupils were normal, both the same size. Tears? "You weren't asleep. You passed out cold."

"I *was* asleep. I just *do* that, okay? Fall asleep for a minute or two. Sometimes, it's longer." He wiped his face on his sleeve. "That's when I. . . have the dreams."

They killed her. "What did you dream?" Escher asked softly.

"I told you, didn't I?" Zachary got unsteadily to his feet, his face sullen. "I always tell, when I come out of it. This woman was walking down this crummy alley and two guys came at her. One shot her and the other grabbed the bag she was carrying." He turned his head away. "That's all I saw. You happy now?"

He was shivering, shaking with more than cold. He really believed it. That he'd seen the future, that it would come true and somewhere, a woman was going to get shot in an alley. "You're soaked," Escher said. Hell of a way to be crazy.

"So you're gonna keep on being pissed?" Zachary said between chattering teeth. "Or are you gonna get scared?"

"I'm not pissed any more." The guy truly was nuts. In a way. . . it was a relief. He had nothing to do with Escher, and the dream had been just that; a dream, a nightmare. "No, I'm not scared either." He held out a hand to Zachary. "We keep some extra overalls in the winch shack. You need some dry clothes."

Zachary didn't have any more seizures, or episodes, or whatever you wanted to call them, during Escher's shift. Not as far as Escher knew, anyway. He asked Escher interminable questions about the insulation, the harness, and how the ice train worked. When he got tired of that, he wandered from one end of the two-kilometer berg to the other, climbing the eroded peaks and slopes, sliding meltwater channels, throwing snowballs, and whooping like a kid. Escher found that he didn't mind having to keep an eye on Zachary. It kept his mind off LA.

"It's really something," Zachary said, as they shared the sandwiches Escher had brought along for his break. "All this water under your feet. Out in the Dry, you're thirsty all the time."

The Dry. Escher stared at the sandwich in his hand, feeling the sun's hot lash, feeling sweat and gritty dust on his skin. An old man stared at a dry horizon of dun hills, face tanned to leather by the sun, hard and closed as the stony land. Full of bitter anger, and Escher knew that the anger was directed at him. Again, it was there, who this was, what it meant, right *there*, on the far side of an invisible wall, so close he could almost touch it. . . .

"Escher?" Zachary touched his arm. "You remembering something?"

"I. . . don't know." Escher put down the rest of his sandwich. "Yeah, I guess so." He rubbed his arms, sweating, although the shack was chilly. "The Dry, I think. Someone." Angry at me? It had had such an *old* feel

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to it, that anger. As if it had been there a long time, like rocks in the ground. He crumbled sandwich and wrapper into a wad, hurled them into the wastebasket. It was like a bloody jigsaw puzzle, only he didn't know the damn picture.

"I know how it is." Zachary swallowed a half-chewed mouthful of sandwich. "You get all these bits and pieces, right? And you don't know what really happened and what didn't."

"Something like that." Escher frowned, trying to recall that fleeting moment when he had almost *known*.

"Willy and I spend a lot of time out in the Dry." Zachary folded his sandwich wrapper into a neat square. "Scavenging."

"What's scavenging?" Escher asked, knowing he should *know* this, sure of it, but coming up with that old familiar nothingness when he tried to remember the meaning of the word.

"We hunt out the abandoned towns. There's a bunch of 'em out there —mostly picked over, but we find some good ones once in awhile. We go through the dumps, check out the houses. You can always sell metal and plastic junk to the dealers. Sometimes, we find good stuff." The sandwich wrapper was getting smaller and smaller between his fingers. "Willy's been doing it a long time." He bent the tiny square of the wrapper, but it was too small and too thickly folded to fold again. "I dream about him, and he doesn't care. He says what happens happens, but he doesn't understand how it works." He looked up suddenly, green flecks glittering in his eyes chips of broken glass. "What was it like? To wake up and not remember anything?"

"It was. . . confusing." He'd never talked about it with anyone, not even Karen. Escher frowned, struggling to sort through those first fractured images. The universe had been a kaleidoscope of light and chaos, and he had cowered in a dark corner of his mind, terrified. The picture had helped, it had taken slow shape; evolving from chaos, to rectangle, to *picture*—a wonderful, wonderful evolution. The freckled nurse had leaned over him one night, so close that her face filled the field of his vision. *Are you in there?* she had whispered. And he had had no words to tell her that he was there, please, don't go away. Words had come back to him later. "I started over," he said, "I'm two years old." Here, with LA breathing down his neck, he felt *new*, fragile, as if a strong wind could shred him like the mist, blow him away. A wind from shore?

"Your memory'll come back, right?" Zachary tossed the folded wad of sandwich wrapper at the wastebasket, missed. "Give me something to do, okay?"

"Okay," Escher said, and sent him out with the probe, to test the ice along the main harness cables. He'd already done it, but it would keep Zachary busy. He wanted to think about the bitter old man and about the Dry. *Your memory'll come back*, Zachary had said. It hit Escher suddenly that Zachary had sounded almost wistful. Huh. Escher picked up Zachary's folded sandwich wrapper and went to check the tension on

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the aft insulation net, remembering the hot feel of the Drylands sun on his shoulders.

It was dark when Trujillo picked them up at shift's end. A soft wind had set in from the southwest, and it was almost warm on the bergs. Karen raised her eyebrows as Zachary climbed aboard, but she merely smiled. Dreaming about Randy, no doubt.

"Who let *him* out on the ice?" Jamie rolled his eyes and shifted aft, clear into the tangle of the hoist. "Walsh'll have your ass."

He was scared of Zachary, watching him continually, his posture hunched and unhappy. It kept him quiet, at least. Zachary noticed it, too. He gave Jamie one sullen stare, and sat silent against the wall, ignoring them all as Trujillo swung the copter into the air. To the east, Los Angeles glowed like a second moon rising.

"There are so many lights down there." Karen peered through the window, clucking disapproval. "Last night, an hour after the power curfew, it was still bright."

"Payola to the power company and the federal inspectors." He hadn't read that in the library, either.

"You're getting your memory back, aren't you?" Karen's face lighted up. "Escher, that's wonderful."

Was it? "I'm remembering some. Not enough to really know anything."

"Tell me!"

He pretended he hadn't heard her, kept his eyes fixed on his clean and blood-free hands as Trujillo swooped them down to the crewship deck.

Back onboard, Karen went off to take a shower before dinner. Her absence left Escher uneasy, stuck with Zachary. He wanted her there, wanted her to distract him with her bright chatter about Randy, and drip hoses, and tomorrow. Now that he was remembering, he wanted to put the brakes on, slow the process down. Or maybe he was just missing her in advance. He led the sulky Zachary down to the mess hall.

The room was full of conversation; a multilingual babble that spilled over from table to table, wafted on warm, food-scented air. Everyone was so *social* all of a sudden—using words to close the two year gap between yesterday and tomorrow. An outsider suddenly, Escher loaded his tray and followed Zachary to a table, glad of his company after all.

"You guys eat good." Zachary forked up cubes of tank-grown carrot. "And the water's great." He had filled three glasses at the counter.

"You know, you can go back for refills. It's not like we're short." Escher picked up his own glass of water, sipped at it.

Pure ice-melt. On shore, you'd buy it in bottles, and pay premium price for it. Or you'd steal it from the tethered bergs—that was another big business in LA. More memory, rising like oil from a sunken wreck. It was as if Los Angeles *was* a second moon; pulling at the past like the moon overhead pulled at the tides. Eyes watched him from the shadows; blue eyes in a weathered face, not angry, just surprised. . . .

I didn't kill you. Escher put his fork down, no longer hungry.

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Across the table, Zachary had put his head down on his empty plate.

"Is he okay?" Karen set her tray down next to Escher, eyes crinkled in concern. "Should I call the doc?"

"He's just asleep." Escher peered at Zachary warily, wondering what he was dreaming this time. "He should wake up in a minute or two."

"The guy's real weird, if you ask me." Jamie hesitated for a long moment before he plunked his tray down across from Karen.

"I have a cousin like that." Karen poked at her lasagna, wrinkled her nose. "He falls asleep just like turning off a switch. One second he's awake, the next, he's snoring. If I never eat lasagna again, I'll be happy."

Zachary twitched suddenly, jerked upright, and screamed a shrill animal note. His plate skittered off the table with a clatter as he struggled to his feet.

"Hey, take it easy." Escher stood. Zachary's eyes stretched wide with some awful vision and he had gone rigid. Shit. Escher grabbed him, shook him hard enough to make his teeth snap together. "Wake up." He shook him again. "Wake *up*."

"They're burning," Zachary said in a high clear voice. "It blew up, the car, and they're burning...." His body went slack suddenly and he stared around, blinking, as if he couldn't quite remember where he was.

In the silence a spoon dropped, and everyone jumped. Karen looked white as the ice, and Jamie's face had gone hard and ugly. They'd all heard about Zachary's wild prediction, and the *Mary Anne* going down.

"Who's burning?" Karen's voice sounded shaky. "What do you mean? What were you talking about?"

"I don't know. Nobody, okay?" Zachary bent slowly, picked up his plate from the floor. "It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean, it doesn't *matter?*" Karen's pallor was turning pink. "Who did you dream about?"

"Nobody here." Zachary put his plate down on his tray, and walked out of the mess without a word.

"That dude's a major weirdo," Jamie said in a soft voice.

"Does he even *care?*" Karen's voice shook slightly.

"Yeah, I think so," Escher said softly. He looked around, seeing pity on a few faces, belief on others. Seeing fear. In the cafeteria doorway, Trujillo crossed himself fervently, eyes on Zachary's retreating back. Escher dumped his tray onto the counter. He could see someone pitching Zachary overboard. You could get very twitchy, waiting to show up in his dreams. If you believed in them.

Zachary was lying on Escher's bunk when Escher got back to the room. The desk drawer was open, and he had the print from the hospital propped on the pillow.

"You sure made an impression." Escher closed the door behind him. "Don't ever sign onto an ice train."

"I wasn't planning to." Zachary wouldn't look at him. "I only signed onto that seiner because Willy needed money. I'd rather be out scavenging. I don't bother anybody out there."

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Yeah, he'd bother people. "You better tell this Willy that scavenging is the safer bet." Escher stripped off his pullover and sat down to pull off his boots. "You won't earn much, drowned."

"Willy didn't know I signed on. He started bugging me about the dreams. . . thinks I can dream stuff to make him rich. Like where a town is or stuff's buried. I told you, he doesn't understand." Zachary hunched his shoulders. "I can't dream about anything on purpose. It just *happens*. It's not always ugly, you know. Those are just the ones I talk about the most when I wake up. But I can't tell Willy how to get *stuff*. I'm not a fortune teller."

Jamie thought he was a fortune teller. Karen did, too, because *Zachary* believed and you could feel it. "So tell this Willy how it is." He sounded like an exploitive bastard. Escher picked up the print and rerolled it. "If he doesn't listen, maybe you should find somewhere else to live."

"I can't. Willy doesn't care if I dream about him. I don't scare him."

Escher lifted his head, met those strange bleak eyes with their broken-glass flecks. Yeah. "It gets pretty lonely, being the crazy prophet, huh?"

Zachary looked away, blinking. "I think I've lived with Willy for a long time. We'll get through this okay."

"What do you mean, you think?" Escher frowned. Zachary had said something like that before—about how *maybe* he'd worked bergs.

"I. . . don't remember things so good." Zachary wouldn't look at him. "You'll get it back one day—being a little kid, your folks loving you, the first time you kissed—all of it. For me, it's like every time I dream about the future, I trade it for a little bit of the past. I just *lose* stuff. So I don't know if I've lived with Willy for a long time, because I can't remember. I never forget the dreams." He clenched his fists. "Like the car tonight. It was blue. Something low and fancy, and it pulled out in front of a big tanker truck. The truck hit it and the car blew up. The flames roared really loud, but you could hear the people inside screaming. It'll happen just like I said. It always happens just like I dream it, and I can't do anything *about* it, all right? so just don't blame *me*, because I can't *stop* it, *I can't keep it from happening!*"

"Hey. Calm down."

Zachary stiffened as Escher put a hand on his arm. For an instant he stared into Escher's face, body rigid, eyes glittering. Then he relaxed suddenly and all at once, drawing a snuffling breath, looking down at the rumpled blanket beneath him. "I can't keep *any* of it from happening," he said in a low voice.

"So who asked you to?" God, *yes*, he cared! What would it be like, to live with a head full of nightmares and think that they were real?

"You don't want to believe me." Zachary looked at him from the corners of his eyes. "You're scared to. You're scared of your own dreams, and don't tell me you're not dreaming."

"No!"

"Hey, it's all right." Zachary's strange, broken-glass eyes were full of

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sudden sympathy. "They scare me, too." He lay down suddenly, curled up and closed his eyes. "Good night."

"Good night," Escher said, wanting to deny it, wanting to tell Zachary that he wasn't afraid of a nightmare, that he didn't have to be afraid, there was nothing to be afraid *of*.

The words wouldn't come. He unrolled the print slowly, staring at the tiny marching figures on their endless stairway. The last two years had been like that; going round and round on an icy stairway of the present, with no past and no future. So, Zachary had no past either. Only his dreams. Beyond the wall, metal *clanged* dully against metal. A crew was working late in the main hold, breaking out the chase boats. They'd start the anchoring process tomorrow. Tomorrow. When they finished, Walsh would pay them off, and Escher would go ashore, step off that stairway. Escher looked down at his bloodless palm, wiped it on his thigh. Zachary was wrong. He wasn't afraid of dreams. It was *reality* that scared him. On the desk, the red numbers on his clock blinked from eleven-fifty-nine to twelve. It was tomorrow. Sometimes, tomorrow *does* come. Go to bed, he told himself. Above him, Zachary turned on his side and began to snore. Escher stood, sighed, pulled the blanket out from under Zachary, and covered him with it.

If Zachary dreamed that night, he didn't wake Escher. Escher dreamed.

You're running out on us. It was the kid again, with that hard look of judgment in his eyes. *You're never going to find what you're looking for. It's not out there, it's inside you. . . .*

"You're wrong!" Escher woke sweating, tasting anger and hopeless, bitter dust on his lips. He had spoken Escher's name, that kid. The echoes still reverberated through his skull. Escher held his breath, wanting to hear it, afraid at the same time. Blank, awful, familiar *nothing*. The air from the ventilator blew cool on his face. Escher reached up, felt tears on his cheeks. "I loved you," he said, and shivered, because the words had come from yesterday, popping into his head full of certainty and terrible pain. Beyond the *Star's* hull, LA waited. *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciuncula.* Queen of the angels. An avenging angel, with a sword of fire in the shape of a truck? Escher wiped his face on his arm. "I didn't kill him," he whispered brokenly.

And *he*, Escher, hadn't. But a stranger waited for him out there in the city. Maybe *he* had held that knife. Who was I? Escher asked the invisible city.

Who will I be tomorrow?

Escher shivered and lay down, pulling the blanket up to his chin. He lay awake for a long time, but the moon of Los Angeles gave him no answers, pulled up no more echoes from his past.

The sun rose over a windless sea. Mist shrouded the train, turned it into a drifting fogbank. The propellers turned slowly, just enough to keep

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the train in place. During the night, they had inched into their deep offshore moorage, and had stopped. Warning lights strobed from each winch shack; lighthouses atop a chain of floating mountains. Trujillo flew low and fast at shift-change, businesslike and not interested in stunts this morning. No one talked much. The trip was over, and everyone wanted to hit shore. The work of anchoring and unharnessing still lay ahead, and it made everyone crabby. Zachary sat beside Escher in the copter. He had disappeared after breakfast, had reappeared just as Escher was going on-shift, silent and uncommunicative. When Escher had asked him if he'd had a bad dream, Zachary had merely shrugged. To Escher's surprise, Walsh sent Zachary out to D berg with him.

"I've got the aft anchor-guides set," Ross said when he boosted himself into the copter. "Watch out. It's slicker than shit out there. That drill is a bitch."

"Stay back from the edge," Escher told Zachary as they slopped through the slush to the aft winch shack. "I'm not doing any high-dives, if you pass out and fall off."

"I won't fall off." Zachary kicked slush, still brooding. "So what are we doing, anyway?"

"Setting the guides for the anchor cables. They don't want these babies drifting around loose." They'd reached the shack. Ross had left the big ice-drill leaning against the outside wall, beside a pile of guide-bolts. You could hear the distant sound of the chase-boat engines as they jockeyed into position to thread the anchor cables across the forward bergs. "Once they're anchored, we cut the harness loose and stow it. The insulation stays in place until they start processing the berg."

Once they got the bergs anchored, the harbor super would sign them off and the trip would be over. Karen would go running into Randy's arms, Jamie would go party, and he would go meet yesterday. Escher looked eastward, but LA was invisible, erased by ice-fog. "Here." He grabbed an armload of the thick, two-meter-long eye bolts, shoved them at Zachary. "Take these. I'll carry the drill."

"They're light." Zachary staggered in surprise as Escher dumped them into his outstretched arms. "What are they? Plastic?"

"Yeah. Same stuff as the harness cables. You can't break it." Escher grunted as he heaved the heavy drill onto his shoulder. "We sink the guides about every hundred meters across the berg," he said. "They run cables across the ice between two anchor buoys." He halted about three hundred meters from the forward end of the berg. "This is where Ross left off."

Ross was right about the slushy berg surface being slicker than shit. The torque of the drill wanted to spin him around in spite of his ice-boots. Zachary grabbed the handles from the opposite side, counterbalancing him as the bit chewed its way slowly into the ice. In spite of the perpetual chill, they were both soaked with sweat by the time they'd gotten the first guide screwed into place. Fight the drill, screw in the

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guide, wipe the sweat out of your eyes, and move on to the next spot. . . . Slowly, they worked their way across the berg, then moved aft.

The chase boats were cabling C berg; Jamie and Karen's berg. It looked as if he and Zachary were going to finish well before the boats got C anchored. They were having some kind of trouble with the aft cables. Escher gave the last bolt a final twist, then straightened, wincing as his back twinged. "We did it," he said, "Thanks a lot. I'd still be sliding around in the slush, if you hadn't come along."

"Sure." Zachary was staring shoreward.

Sometime in the last hour a breeze had begun to shred the mist, but Escher had been too busy struggling with the drill to pay much attention. He sucked in his breath. Sun glittered on the anchored bergs in the melting pens, or waiting for transport north to the smaller terminals. They formed an icy breakwater that stretched from Palos Verdes north to Malibu. To the east, the towers and arcologies of LA proper rose in a stark silhouette against the sky. In between, bounded by ice and the towers, lay Ice Town; the maze of melting pens, collection depots, pipelines, and humanity that turned chunks of Antarctica into water, sent it flowing out to the thirsty land as irrigation water, drinking water, or expensive, bottled ice-melt. Escher realized that he was holding his breath, let it out in a rush.

"Cool view," Zachary said. "From shore, the trains look solid, like a wall. We're a long way out." He walked out to the very edge of the ice. "I got to get back to Willy," he said. "I. . . kind of ran out on him. Because he kept bugging me about dreaming stuff and I was pissed, but I shouldn't have left him. He's old, and he doesn't get around too well any more. He needs me to do the heavy work, out scavenging, and. . . and I guess I just need to get back." He kicked a small spray of icy slush from the rim of the berg, watched it fall into the sluggish swell far below. "Your boss called me into his office, this morning. He said the company filed a personal lien against me, for picking me up and letting me stay on the train. They signed me on for a week in the melting pens, shoveling ice. I'm not going to do it." He looked up at Escher, his eyes dark with shadows. "If Willy takes off, if I can't find him right away. . . I might forget him. The dreams might crowd him out."

Would it be worse to lose your memory that way? A piece at a time, knowing that it was happening? "No one goes ashore until we're signed off by the terminal super." Escher sighed, and pulled off his gloves. "Call Willy and tell him where you are. I'll pay for it."

"We don't have a phone, and I'll still be stuck with the lien. Escher. . . he's not scared of me. Here, this is yours." Zachary peeled off the sweater Escher had leant him, handed it over. "The boots and the coveralls belong here. So do the gloves. Damn, it's *cold*." He did a little barefoot dance on the ice, wearing only his threadbare jeans and shirt.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Escher threw the sweater aside and grabbed his arm. "If you're thinking of swimming, it's too far. Forget it. You'll drown."

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"No I won't." Zachary bared his teeth in a grin. "I told you I dream all kinds of stuff. I've dreamed how I die, and the dreams always come true. Deep down you believe me, whether you want to or not. I know how I'm going to die, and this isn't it. I don't drown." The broken-glass flecks in his eyes glinted green. "You're going to remember who you are. Don't worry." With a quick twist, he freed himself from Escher's grasp, took two running steps, and dived gracefully from the rim of the berg.

"Zachary!" Escher lunged for him, nearly skidding over the slushy rim of the berg himself. *Jump!* He hesitated, heart pounding.

Zachary had surfaced, was swimming strongly and easily for shore. Idiot. Crazy idiot. Escher snatched the comm-link from his belt. "Control?" he snapped. "This is Escher, on D. I've got an overboard, off the southeast corner. I need a pickup."

"Roger," the clipped voice answered him. "Relaying overboard; southeast corner of D berg. Who is it, anyway?"

"Zachary Odell. The guy we picked up after the storm." Sorry, Zachary. Better to get fined for trying to jump a lien than to drown. "He's trying to swim for shore," Escher said.

There was a brief silence. "Chase boat *Belinda* is taking the pick-up," the voice told him. "Out."

The chase boat was already peeling away from C berg, tooting its whistle impatiently. Escher shaded his eyes, but he'd lost sight of Zachary, blinded by the sun-dazzle. Damn. He searched the blue-green swell desperately. This wasn't 70°S. The water was warm and Zachary had been swimming fine.

Crouched on the rim of the berg, Escher watched and waited as the *Belinda* circled and searched. Cold seeped into him, pooling in his belly as the minutes dragged on and on, and they didn't find Zachary. He should have jumped, should have gone in after him. Finally, slowly, the *Belinda* veered off, giving up, heading back to C berg to finish the cabling. His comm link was beeping, but Escher didn't answer it. He should have jumped in.

He hadn't. Because. . . he had been afraid at last. *I know you're going to remember*, Zachary had said.

Zachary was right. A tiny place inside him *did* believe. And that part of him had been afraid of what Zachary might tell him. So he had stayed on the berg rim, wanting Zachary to escape, to get out of his life. Instead, he had drowned. Escher hiked forward to catch the cable shot from *Belinda*, stiff with cold, teeth chattering. Behind him, LA breathed on his neck, and Escher felt a crushing sense of déjà vu.

It took them three more endless days to finish anchoring the bergs, dismount the propellers and get everything stowed in the holds. Everyone worked extra shifts, because they all wanted to get off. The offshore breeze carried the scent of land, the smell of friends, lovers, bars, *real life*. It was right *there*, and suddenly the close quarters and cold labor of the train were intolerable.

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Crew members snapped at each other over nothing, or babbled nonstop about what they were going to do, who was waiting for them, how they were going to spend their wages. Escher tried not to listen as he helped stow the enormous propellers and inventoried harness fittings. He felt more like a stranger than he had felt down in Ushuaia, where the crew had made up. No one was going to sign up for a train ever again. They all had something to go back to, someone to go forward with.

The cabin hummed with emptiness—an accusing emptiness. Zachary's ghost? Escher worked extra shifts, tumbling into bed so numb with exhaustion that he fell instantly asleep, before that accusatory emptiness could whisper in his ears.

He didn't dream.

Zachary had been the moon after all—not LA. *Zachary* had tugged the blond kid, the surprised bleeding man, into his brain. And Escher had stayed on the berg rim.

He had been swimming fine and *Belinda* was at berg-side, Escher told himself a hundred times. There had been no reason to jump in after Zachary. None. In the end, in a few cold moments of struggle, Zachary had discovered that his dreams didn't come true after all. A bitter irony. Escher shrugged off Karen's attempts at sympathy and pretended not to notice her bewildered hurt. One by one, the hours sneaked past. LA breathed on his neck with a warm, earth-scented breath, waiting for him.

The supervisor of the Greater Los Angeles Ice-Processing Facility showed up at last: a small, nervous man who stomped around on each and every berg, as if he needed the physical feel of the ice beneath his feet in order to believe the mass figures and core sample data provided in the inventory. Finally, sour-faced, he thumbprinted the Captain's electronic log. The voyage was officially over. The crew's salaries had been transferred to their accounts by Tanaka Corporation, and people were already leaving. Heading home.

In his empty cabin that had always looked empty, Escher took the print from his desk drawer. The tiny figures marched round and round, trapped on their stairway. Escher wondered suddenly if they thought they were going somewhere. He rolled the print up, snapped a rubber band around it, and stuffed it into his carryall. Time to go. She was waiting, the Queen of Angels. *He* was waiting; the man who had walked those streets, who had been hit by a truck one night. Escher shut the door tightly behind him, and hurried up to the deck.

"You're not taking the copter?" Jamie called out from the crowd at the edge of the landing pad.

"There's no line for the boats." Escher shrugged.

That wasn't the real reason. He slung his carryall over his shoulder and stepped onto the ladder that dangled down to the deck of one of the chase boats. The copter would bring him in too fast, whirl him up, over, and down; dump him smack into the middle of the city. He wanted to

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sneak up on it, ease himself into yesterday. Butterflies fluttered invisibly in his stomach as the ladder swung outward beneath his weight. He dropped to the deck of the chase boat, and jumped as someone touched his arm.

"Sorry." Karen smiled at him, eyes sparkling. "I didn't mean to startle you. He called this morning. Randy. He's meeting me on the dock." She shaded her eyes, peering up at the rust-streaked cliff-face of the ship's side. "Everyone wants to take a copter in." She clucked her tongue and laughed. "By the time they get to the head of the line, we'll be there. God." She looked around the aft deck, crowded now with knots of excited men and women. "I *hated* this boat when we were wrapping the bergs. I never thought I'd get warm again. Remember how sick you got, when it was rough that time? And now. . . I don't know." She took Escher's arm suddenly, stood close and warm against him. "It's over," she said. "I guess it's finally starting to sink in. That I won't see this boat again, or my cabin, or you, or Trujillo." She grimaced, and laughed. "I won't miss that closet of a cabin. . . but I'll miss *you*." Her smile had gone hesitant, unsure. "If you come up to the Willamette Valley, will you come visit me? We're near a little town called Ryder. It's just a government store and a couple of houses, but folks can tell you how to find our place. I'd. . . really like to see you again."

"I'll try," Escher said, because that was what she wanted him to say. Their lovemaking down at 70°S was a thread of sweetness woven into a long dream of cold, and twilight, and the moan of the wind over Antarctic ice. Maybe the man she had made love to wasn't even a real person. Escher felt a sudden chill. Maybe he was part of the dream, not the dreamer.

She felt his reluctance and let go of him abruptly. Escher felt a pang of guilt as she retreated, because she was hurt and trying to hide it. How would he think of Karen, when his memory returned? Would he still treasure her generous comfort, the way she smiled when she woke up in the morning? Or would he see her. . . differently? Escher shivered as the boat angled away from the white mountain of G berg. He hadn't thought of it before—that *he*, Escher, might. . . change. He felt a sudden giddy fright as he hung his carryall on one of the mounting plates that had secured the huge rolls of insulating film down at 70°S. As if he was about to leap from the edge of a berg, like Zachary had done. Would he drown, too? The boat eased between the anchored bergs, and the misty chill raised gooseflesh on his arms. Karen had joined the cluster of crew aft, was smiling at something someone had said. Escher turned his back on them and went forward along the rail. The powerful engines growled a lower note as they eased through the narrow channel and then. . .

. . . they were through.

Escher's stomach lurched as the cluttered vista opened in front of him. Ice Town.

Everyone had expected the Big One, the super quake that would shatter the entire coast of California. It had never come. Instead, two or three

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of its offspring had more-or-less gently sunk the LA basin. Not much. Just enough to invite the sea in. Encyclopedia knowledge, yes. . . .

I know this place. Escher shivered, because he had lived here. *Here,* not in LA itself. The shells of old buildings jutted from the smooth surface of the bay like the trunks of broken trees. The melting pools filled the center of the bay; expanding plastic sacks that hung from the floating rims built around the bergs. Crushed ice floated like white scum on the surface of the pools, hundreds of acres of ice, melting slowly and cheaply in the warm ebb and flow of the tides. An explosion boomed across the water, and a puff of mist rose from the berg within the nearest pool rim. A 'dozer crawled forward, pushing a white avalanche of broken ice over the rim of the berg. Small figures with shovels and sledges crawled across the gleaming surface—cheap labor from Ice Town, cheaper than gasoline. Escher drew a slow breath.

This was the heart, the core of it all—water. Water was wealth, power, life. You could paddle out to the tethered bergs that sweated silently in the sun, plant a few collection traps, and live on the water you stole. If someone else didn't steal it from *you,* first. He knew the beat of this heart. Escher's stomach clenched as he shaded his eyes.

Ice Town grew out from the shore of Los Angeles, spreading like pond scum between the broken buildings, reaching toward the melting pens like a growth of dark weed. Decks and huts clung like strange birds' nests to the glassless windows of the drowned buildings. A tangled web of catwalks and floating walkways connected building to building, cobbled together from salvaged scraps of wood, plastic, cable, and even some rusty metal. A labyrinth of piers thrust out from shore, crusted with shacks that looked as if they could fall into the bay at any second. Barges and houseboats, tied up side by side, formed a lower level in the shadow of the piers. Green plots of garden thrived on dirt-filled rafts at the fringes of the floating city. Official navigation channels sliced through the chaos, joined by narrow, twisting "streets," that opened and closed up again overnight.

Ice Town. Water had created it. Some god had pushed down on this spot with an invisible thumb. Water had rushed in, and so had all the rootless people; refugees from the Dry. If you didn't have anywhere else to go, if you were smart enough and lucky enough to stay out of the refugee camps, you came to Ice Town.

Like *he* had come here. Running from murder? Running from that bloody knife? Escher shook his head, dizzy with a moment of double vision; stranger and homecomer at the same instant. The off-shore breeze touched Escher's face with ghostly fingers, smelling of mudflat, food, and sewage. Smelling of yesterday. They were in the channel now, edging between clustered houseboats and barges, just seaward of the first of the drowned buildings. A scrawny woman with a thin braid of white hair and a face like old leather weeded vegetable plants on a dirt-covered raft. Squatting on the edge of a battered houseboat, a man dressed in dirty undershorts smoked a handrolled cigarette while he washed a pair

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of jeans in the bay. Two naked children tumbled and shrieked on the narrow deck behind him.

Escher smelled marijuana and shit, watched a small boy piss into the bay from the door of a crude shack that floated on scraps of plastic foam. Behind the invisible barrier of his forgetting, something *moved*; like a ghostly face pressed briefly against a dirty window. Himself? The man who had lived here?

A sampan-style boat drifted close. A small black dog wagged its tail at Escher from the prow, while the withered Asian man in the stern held up shredded vegetables, wrapped in some kind of flat pancake. In the center of the boat, the cracked bowl of a flush toilet held a bed of glowing coals. Skewers of pale meat sizzled on a piece of wire mesh. Escher shook his head. With an expert thrust of his paddle, the old man veered gracefully away. He would pay protection to the sharks who ran his pier. The sharks owned Ice Town. The sampan disappeared around a double-wide mobile home mounted on a barge. THE HARBOR GRILL ENCHILADAS, a hand-lettered sign proclaimed. Greasy smoke rose from a rusty stovepipe, and a gust of wind brought Escher the smell of cumin, rancid grease, and wood smoke.

"Hey mister, missy! Flowers! Fresh oranges, watered with ice-melt, man." A skinny kid hawked limp roses and spotted fruit from grimy plastic buckets on one end of the barge.

His skin was scabby and thick from eating wild, toxin-laden shellfish harvested from under the piers. He'd be selling blackmarket antivirals, or drugs, from underneath the flowers and fruit. Escher stared down at him, met flat black eyes that gave away nothing, and his stomach lurched. He'd lived here. Yesterday. If he wanted to, he knew how to ask the price of what the kid sold, and get an answer...almost.

Escher clutched the rail, clammy with sweat, so close to memory, to yesterday. The boat was slowing, engines throbbing a low, guttural note. The bright new towers of LA vanished behind the broken teeth of the drowned offices and the rotting pilings of the piers as they neared shore. The silvery dish of a solar water-still winked in the afternoon sunlight, and, somewhere, a rooster crowed.

The piers closed in on either side like a dark forest. Rickety bracing timbers crisscrossed between the pilings, crusted with birds' nests and streaked with white shit. Swallows darted in and out beneath the overhead planks, dipping and diving for insects above a floor of houseboats, barges, and a scum of garbage. Water dripped monotonously from the pier level. A skinny girl scrambled down from the bracings beneath the pier deck, the mesh bag on her back full of tiny swallow eggs and squirming, half-feathered baby birds. She gave Escher a wary glance, leaped onto the roof of a crummy shackboat, and disappeared through a trap door.

You got a good price for eggs and squab in the marketplace. Memory was seeping back like the tide, but it was background only—setting the stage, waiting for the actor to walk on. *He* was still in the wings. Waiting

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for his cue. A landing edged into the channel up ahead. It was a sturdy platform of scavenged lumber floating solidly on blue plastic drums. A crude stairway led up to the pier level. "Let me off here," Escher called to the pilot, and felt a twinge of excitement and something that might have been fear. The request had come from that actor in the wings, not from him.

"What are you doing?" Karen came running forward, her face pale in the shadows. "You can't get off here! I thought . . ." She blushed suddenly.

"No." Escher looked away. "I don't want to meet Randy." He picked up his carryall.

"Escher, wait!" She seized his face between her palms, her eyes angry and full of pain. "It wasn't just sex, down south. I really care about you, Escher, but I love Randy, too, I've loved him since we were kids. Look, I feel bad enough about it already. Don't punish me, Escher. That's not fair."

"I'm not." Escher took her hands, struggling with the chaos inside him. "What if . . . Karen, what if I was . . . a really *different* person before?"

"What are you saying?" Karen tilted her head, eyes on his face. "You couldn't be really *bad*. Escher, you're *you*. Whatever you did or didn't do in the past, you're the same man."

"Am I?" He swallowed. "What if that's not true? What if I was a different person—a murderer?"

"I don't believe it." Her eyes flickered. "Maybe you had a reason," she whispered. "Maybe it was self defense, or you were saving someone. I *know* you, Escher." She stood on tiptoe, kissing him hard on the lips, then turned and ran back along the rail.

The chase boat nudged the dock with a jolt, began to slide past. Maybe she was right. Maybe it had been self defense—an attack, a mugging in an alley. Dreams weren't always true—Zachary had found that out.

He had seen doubt in Karen's eyes. Just a tiny shadow, but it was there. It hadn't been a mugging, or self defense. Escher grabbed up his carryall, and leaped. The landing rocked beneath him as he scrambled up the crude steps, past the high-tide scars of harvested mussels and barnacles, past the empty swallow nests, up into the open air.

He found himself on the warped boards of the pier, panting in the hot sun, standing between a tiny grocery store and a shower house. *Unlimited time*, the sun-faded sign in the window announced. Which meant that the water would be half seawater, and the recycle filters probably hadn't been changed in a year. Good place to pick up one of the new staphs. Clutching his carryall, Escher walked shoreward, stalked by shadows, by yesterday. The faces were mostly Asian, on this pier. Small women carrying infants and laden baskets gave him sharp, sideways looks and men shuffled by without making eye contact. Buildings completely filled the space between the pier he was on and the one to the south. They had been built from the scavenged guts of the drowned buildings; fiberboard that had melted and warped in the occasional rain,

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wood, broken sheets of plastic and scraps from rusted-out cargo containers, hammered flat.

It squeezed him, the *familiarity*, made him want to scream out loud. Escher turned suddenly aside. A drink shack displayed a crudely painted picture of an orange, and a glass of vivid juice. He went inside, clutched by thirst, needing to get off the crowded familiar pier for just a moment. The floor of the tiny shack shook beneath his feet, and he hesitated, eyeing the wizened old woman who sat sewing behind a crude counter.

"Whiskey?" The woman laid aside her sewing and waved at the cloudy plastic bottles on a battered shelf behind her. An old man snored in the corner, head resting on his knees. "Beer? Water? Ice-melt?" She grinned, revealing a set of blindingly white plastic teeth. "Orange juice? Fresh-squeeze, very fresh."

"Water," Escher said, because juice could hide a lot of seawater. And it wouldn't be real juice, anyway. Not in this place. More memory.

"Ice? Dollar extra."

Escher shook his head. Above her plastic grin, her black eyes watched him carefully as she ran his debit card through a handheld register. She was nervous. Escher watched her fill a mug from the plastic carboy that stood on a wooden crate beside the decrepit refrigerator. She was more than nervous. He smiled at her as he took the mug. For an instant, a single worry line creased her forehead; one more wrinkle barely noticeable in the folded landscape of her sundried face. Escher sipped at the blood-warm water, mouth wincing at a hint of mudflat, guts full of lead. "You're afraid of me," he said.

The harsh syllables, too loud for the tiny, hot space, woke the old man. He stared at Escher, head nodding on his spindly neck, rheumy eyes blinking.

The woman's face had gone carefully blank. She spread her hands palm up, said something rapidly and apologetically in sing-song, incomprehensible syllables.

"Forget it." Escher finished the water, because water was expensive and there hadn't been much left of his wages, once the hospital had taken its share.

He set the empty mug down on the counter. The woman's sewing lay in a heap beside it. Escher lifted a corner. It was a blouse; real silk from the feel of it, light as a cloud. Gold and black embroidery covered part of it; tiny, perfect stitches that glittered in the dusty light that seeped through the window. The woman's obsidian eyes had fixed themselves on his hand. This would be how she fleshed out her income; doing piece work for one of the upscale custom shops. If he damaged the blouse, she would probably have to pay for it. She *expected* him to damage it, Escher realized.

She was afraid of him.

"Who am I?" Rage blossomed suddenly in Escher's head. "You can't just look at me like that. Tell me!" he shouted. "Tell me why you're afraid. Tell me who the hell I *am!*"

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They both stared at him now, faces expressionless, their eyes holes into a black void. Escher flung the blouse down on the counter, hand trembling. "Never mind," he mumbled and fled the shop, stumbling over the threshold and into the blast of sunshine.

He headed shoreward, walking too fast for the heat, sweating and light-headed. Everyone knew him. *Everyone.* People gave him subtle space, didn't look at him directly. They got out of his way. He walked faster, wanting to throw his arms wide, scream *Who am I?* until someone told him. He laughed, and shut up immediately, because the echo of hysteria in that laugh scared him.

I am *me.* Escher focused on ice, darkness, the cold agony of the Ross Sea, the warmth of Karen's body against his. Escher. *You couldn't be bad,* she had told him. *You couldn't hurt anyone.*

Yeah.

Shadow fell across his face, and Escher stumbled to a halt. One of the drowned buildings loomed over the pier. Weeds sprouted in the cracked walls, and children perched in the empty windows or on rickety balconies, yelling to each other, spitting down on pedestrians, who screamed threats up in return. A cage containing three small black chickens hung in one glassless window, swinging gently in the wind. A few feet above the level of the pier, someone had sledge-hammered a window out to make a rough doorway. A man lounged against the broken edge of the crude doorway, picking at a rash on his face. His pale eyes rested briefly on Escher, then slid away as he dabbed at a bright spot of blood on his blotchy cheek.

Recognition gleamed in those eyes.

Ask *him* your name. Escher stalked past, stifflegged and silent, afraid and despising himself for that fear and that silence. Ahead, four youths prowled toward him, their sun-dark faces slashed with white diagonals of untanned skin, hair braided with wire. Sharks. Members of the gangs that owned Ice Town. One of them stumbled intentionally into a pile of oranges that an old man was selling from a tattered mat. Withered fruit rolled across the planks, and the old man scrambled after them on all fours. His face wore the same expression as the old woman's face in the drink shack.

Escher lifted a hand, flexed his fingers, suddenly aware of movement, of his *body.* That was it—he was broadcasting a code with every twitch of his muscles; a warning, like the bright colors of a poisonous reef fish. That's what had frightened the old woman. She had recognized him for a predator, a shark. His body moved with the smooth confidence of a hunting cat, as if his flesh had its own memory.

One of the sharks kicked a squashed and ruined orange. It bounced off a basket spread with drying seaweed and hit Escher in the knee, spattering him with sticky pulp. The slash-faced shark looked his way, eyes bright, waiting for Escher to react to the challenge. And he had to react, yesterday whispered in his ear. If he didn't, he was prey. That's the way it is, out here on the piers. You're predator or prey. Nothing in between.

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Movement caught Escher's eye. The blotch-faced man was working his way through the crowd, his expression intent.

"Hey, sweetheart." The shark slid toward him, a blade in his hand. "I'm talking to you, sweetheart."

It was a blood issue now; cut or get cut. Escher felt his body shifting, getting ready, as if he was a puppet and some invisible hand was pulling the strings. He could feel it in his muscles—a sureness, a certainty that he could dodge that knife, turn it back on the shark. His flesh didn't want to die, *he* didn't want to die, and if he had to. . . he would kill this guy to live. He. The real man, not Escher, who was nothing more than a veil of mist on the iceberg of a forgotten life. In a moment, that mist would blow away on the hot wind of violence. The shark lunged, knife-hand snaking out. . . .

"No!" Escher spun on his heel, fighting his muscles, fighting yesterday, wrenching his legs into motion. *I'm me, not him.* Escher. *Me!* He ran, ducking past a man carrying a pole strung with dried fish. Running made him prey. Part of him knew it, and that part hated him for running. . . no no, don't think about it, get out while you can, before you remember, before you, Escher, dissolve and die.

"Escher! In here."

Escher. The name snagged him like a treble hook. He veered left, toward the sound, toward the sledgehammered doorway in the drowned building, bursting through and into darkness. Yesterday shouted *danger* with a rush of adrenalin through his veins. Someone grabbed his arm and he tore himself free, his body tensing for an attack, yesterday rising up to drown him. . . .

"Hey Escher, Escher, it's me! Take it easy!"

The voice hit him like a handful of slush in the face. "Zachary!" Escher gasped.

"Yeah, who else? Who's on your ass?"

It *was* him, Zachary, alive not dead. "You drowned!" Escher gasped, knees trembling, shaking as yesterday retreated sullenly. "I thought you drowned."

"I *told* you I wouldn't." Zachary gave him a crooked grin. "I cut back along the bergs—in the shadow, you know? I hung with this old lady who was out after squid. Hey, man, are you all right?"

"Yeah, no. I'm not sure." Escher shook his head, dazed, struggling against the memory that wanted to rise up and drown him. "He was right, you know? The doctor. It wasn't the accident, it wasn't brain damage. I don't *want* to remember, only I'm *going* to. If I don't get out of here." Escher gasped for breath. "Someone's chasing me. Does this hallway go anywhere?"

"I don't know," Zachary gave him a troubled look. "You're really coming unglued. Come on, let's go see."

Escher followed him, yesterday treading on his heels, plucking at this sleeve. Waterstained plasterboard buckled from the walls, scabrous with peeling wallpaper. Water slapped concrete somewhere below in a distant,

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hollow rhythm, and acrid dust rose from the rotting carpet underfoot. Doorways opened on their left, bright with sun. Escher glanced nervously into a room. A balcony hung outside the glassless window, crowded with potted herb plants. A crude ladder cobbled together from grimy pvc pipe disappeared through a hole in the ceiling, and a darkskinned naked girl crouched on the upper rungs, picking her nose. Staring at Escher, she wiped her finger on her thigh and let go a thin stream of urine that pattered on the filthy floor.

Escher breathed shallowly, smelling shit, dank mudflat, and piss. No one lives on the pier level, yesterday whispered. You live high.

Shut up! Escher shook his head.

"Hey, this way." Zachary tugged at him, leading him as if he was a child. "You don't want to remember, huh? How come?"

"Because I'm Escher, and I want to *stay* Escher." He followed Zachary into a room, peered out one of the big, glassless windows. The dry brown peaks of the San Gabriels were visible through a thin veil of haze. "What do you think?" He drew a ragged breath. "If you really hated the person you'd become, could you. . . just stop *being* that person? Wake up one day and be someone else?"

"You think you did that?" Zachary asked softly.

"Karen said I was the same man, but she was wrong." Escher stared down at a narrow ledge that ran beneath the window. Bird shit crusted it; gray and dirty white. "I've got to get out of here. If I. . . remember, I won't exist any more. Me, *Escher*."

Zachary was staring at him, head tilted, eyes doubtful. "You haven't seen Willy around, have you?" He changed the subject abruptly. "Oh yeah, you don't know him, do you? I. . . forgot."

He leaned through the window suddenly, thighs pressed against the cracked sill, body canted out at such an angle that Escher grabbed his shirt. The pigeon perched on the ledge took fright, shedding a single gray feather as it fluttered away. Zachary stared after it. "You can't stop tomorrow from happening," he said in a low voice. "Willy's gone. I thought he might be down here, because we sell some of our stuff in Ice Town, but no one's seen him. If he went out scavenging, if he's gone for a long time. . . I'm *already* forgetting stuff about him and me." His voice trembled. "I can't lose him. He isn't scared of me."

And that was what counted? "Zachary, I'm sorry." Escher pulled Zachary back from the window. "Listen, he's probably around somewhere. He'll. . . " He stiffened at a sound from the hallway.

Footsteps. Someone was trying to be quiet. The skin tightened between Escher's shoulderblades. Maybe it was just the kid, sneaking after them. Or someone else from upstairs. He eased across the floor, flattened himself against the doorframe, and peered cautiously down the hallway. A shadowy figure was peering into one of the rooms down the hall. As he stepped back into the hallway, a shaft of light from the setting sun caught his face.

The ruddy light made the eczema blotches glow angry red.

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Shit. Escher stepped back from the door, colliding with Zachary, who had crept up behind him. Yesterday was out there in the hall. "I've got to get out of here," Escher whispered. He slung his carryall over his shoulder and climbed over the window sill. One leg, the other. Dark, oily swells slapped the wall twenty feet below, scummed with garbage, rushing in and out through barnacle-crusted windows. The ledge looked about three inches wide. He let himself down slowly, toes reaching, shirt sliding up his chest so that the concrete scraped his stomach.

The ledge jarred the soles of his feet. No problem. It was a lot wider than three inches, although the pigeon shit made it slippery in spots. To Escher's surprise, Zachary dropped lightly down beside him. He winked, and Escher felt a rush of gratitude. Zachary might have triggered the dreams, but he was part of Escher's world. He had no connection to yesterday.

Escher worked his way along the ledge, not daring to look back, belly tensed against a shout, or gunshots, or whatever. At the corner of the building, the ledge had broken, leaving a ragged edge. A shack jutted out above them, clinging to the pier, supported by a crisscrossed forest of scrap lumber and old pipe. An herb shop, Escher remembered vaguely. A palm-reader, something like that.

"Hey!"

The shout came from overhead. Shit! Blotch-face must have spotted them, had run back through the building and out onto the pier. Escher looked around wildly. A labyrinth of boards braced the pier, not many feet from the ledge. Escher leaped for the closest support, tensed for the crack of breaking wood, for the rush of a fall. . . .

Wood slammed his palms, bruising his fingers. His toes slipped off the board and he caught himself by his hands, gasping for breath. Zachary leaped for a nearby beam and swung back into shadow, agile as a monkey. Escher clambered after him, his carryall dragging at his shoulders, snagging on old nails and broken boards. They were out of sight now, safe in the shadows beneath the pier, hidden by the overhanging herb shop.

"Yo." Zachary reached, snagged a knotted hank of rope that dangled in the shadows. "We can climb down."

It was a rope latter, with rungs made of old electrical conduit. The herb shop's back door? Escher clambered over to it, wriggling clumsily between the boards and bits of scrap. Zachary was already halfway down the ladder. He was enjoying himself, Escher thought sourly. As if this was a big game of hide and seek.

For him, it was. He was so damned sure he was immortal, protected by his crazy dreams.

Escher wasn't immortal. He grabbed the plastic rope, his bruised palms aching, carryall banging against his back. The ladder swung beneath his weight, and the rungs felt slippery, as if they'd been greased. Step down. . . another. . . his knee banged against one of the pilings. Pants and skin shredded on the splintery wood. Almost down? His feet slipped

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off a rung and his hands let go suddenly. Escher gasped, then grunted as he landed on a small barge. He staggered and nearly fell into the filthy water as it rocked beneath his feet. It was already dark down here. Light gleamed from the far end of the barge, or raft, or whatever it was that they'd landed on.

Escher squinted, made out an arched tent-like shelter constructed from an old plastic tarp. A flap lifted. The pale oval of a face appeared briefly, then vanished as the flap dropped into place once more. Keep moving, and most people left you alone. More memory, useful and dangerous. Don't listen to it or you'll die. . . . It was hard to shut out. Yesterday filled the air down here, thick as the dank smell of the bay. Hinges creaked overhead. Escher looked up as a crack of light widened, revealing a trapdoor above the rope ladder.

"This guy wants you bad," Zachary hissed in his ear.

No shit. Escher ran, stumbling through darkness and seeping light. Zachary followed at his heels as he leaped from boat, to barge, to raft. A dog yapped at them from a crate. People squatted around stoves or open cooking fires. Children shrieked at them, but the adults mostly kept silent, staring sullenly, staying out of it, whatever *it* was. Hispanic faces, under this pier. All races lived in Ice Town. An old man swore a rattling string of syllables as they hopped from the stern of his spotless houseboat to a filthy barge. They were well out from under the pier, now, angling out toward the melting pens. The sun had set, and it was getting dark. Escher leaped, landed on a raft that tilted alarmingly beneath his weight. Cold water slopped over his feet, soaking his jeans. He leaped again, nearly dropping his carryall as the next raft dipped. Arms windmilling, he fell forward into soft dirt and plants that crushed pungently beneath his palms. A garden barge. He scrambled to his knees, trying not to think about the human shit they used as fertilizer on these things. Zachary darted past him, and Escher followed him out to the end of the soil-covered barge, trying not to trample the crowded crop plants.

Open water lay beyond them. A penned berg caught the last glimmer of sunlight on its peaks, jagged and fractured by the shovel crew. Now what? Escher looked back toward the pier. Darkness blurred the chaos of anchored rafts and barges, tricked the eye into seeing a landscape of solid ground. Lights gleamed, and open fires flickered here and there. "We can work our way shoreward," he said. "If we're lucky, he'll miss us in the dark."

"It's shorter this way." Zachary nodded at the open water. "I live right across there, near the terminal. We'll lose that guy for sure, swimming. Water's pretty clean, out this far. Can't you swim?"

"I can swim." Sort of. Karen had taught him as they crept northward through the warm, equatorial sea. Escher looked over his shoulder again. A shadow moving on that last barge? The barge's owner? He squinted, but the shape had vanished into shadow. Maybe it had been nothing more than shadow itself; his imagination in overdrive. Maybe. "It's too far," he said.

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"It's safe." Zachary laughed softly. "I told you, I'm not going to drown. If I don't let go of you, you won't drown either. Besides, we can follow the fence in."

There was a wild note to Zachary's laugh that raised the hairs on Escher's neck. *My dreams are real, so I can't die.* Was that belief he heard, or a challenge to death? An invitation from a man tortured beyond endurance? Thanks, I'll walk, he started to say, but he closed his mouth without speaking.

A small splash might have been the barge rocking as someone leaped from its edge. Escher listened, heard it clearly; the soft thud of feet striking dirt. Sound *carried* out here. He was trapped. Escher looked around wildly, but the garden barge jutted out beyond the floating barge-city. No way off, except into the water. Choose, Escher. Which scares you more? Yesterday, or the water? He could drown in either. "Let's go." He hitched his carryall higher and slid into the water.

It was cold. The moon wasn't up yet, and it was full dark now. Point in their favor. Escher swam a slow breast-stroke after Zachary, trying not to think about the dark stretch of water between him and the shore. Zachary had been right about the fence. It was close; a yard or so of coated mesh sticking up above the slow swell, gummy with weed. It surrounded the entire melting complex, was supposed to stop bootleggers from getting in with their hoses and pumps. But they got in anyway, through the holes cut in the mesh, in scuba gear, or just by snorkel and lungpower, hauling the home-made siphons over to the pens. A lot of them drowned, and a lot more got caught.

More memory. Don't think, just swim.

Escher pulled himself along the fence, his legs already aching from the cold and the unfamiliar exertion. The fence didn't help all that much. The sluggish waves tugged at him, trying to pull him loose, cold from the pregnant bellies of the melting pens. How much further? They must have swum a mile already, and there *wasn't* a mile between the barge and the shore. Currents of icewater wrapped him, making him shiver, and after awhile, he couldn't stop shivering. Idiot. Fool. He should have taken his chances with yesterday. Escher clutched the wire as a cramp twinged his thigh. Too late to turn back now. The cramp hit him full force, doubling him over. One hand came loose from the mesh, and the sea tugged at him, trying to tear him loose, hungry for his life.

Escher groaned as the cramp racked him again. It felt as if his muscles were tearing away from the bone. His carryall dragged at his shoulder. . . a million pounds heavy. He let it go as a wavelet slapped his face. Choking, his lungs spasmed in a brief, primitive panic. He was going to drown. The reality seized him, dug claws into his sanity.

"Relax." Zachary appeared beside him, clutching the fence. "Just let go of the fence and float. I'll pull you in." His arm slid across Escher's chest, fingers clamping into Escher's armpit.

"I can't," Escher gasped. The sea would seize him, suck him down. Fear squeezed the air from his lungs as he sank briefly in the cold water.

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"Let *go*," Zachary panted in his ear. "I'll hold on to you, and I can't drown. I *know* it."

He was shivering, too, but he *believed*. He believed in his damn dreams. A tiny part of Escher believed, too. He reached for that belief, clutched it to him. . . and managed to let go of the fence. His body shuddered as it floated free in the swell, wanting to fight the cold water, fight the threat of death. It took every ounce of his self-control to lie still, to suffer the spasms in his leg and let Zachary do the work.

Zachary can't drown. Zachary won't let go, so I won't drown either. Escher repeated the words like a mantra, struggling to breathe as small waves broke over his face. How *far?* He was shivering, shuddering with cold. The bergs were melting, seeping Antarctic chill into the bay. . . a million years were crawling past. . . .

Something solid banged his hip. It hurt. Escher groped, touched soggy wood with his numb fingers. Zachary was hauling himself out onto a splintered, half-submerged dock, still clutching Escher's shirt. Slowly, painfully, Escher dragged himself up onto blessedly solid planks. The air felt so *warm*, felt wonderful. Shuddering, colder than he'd ever been on the ice train, he sprawled beside Zachary, too exhausted to move. A long, low building loomed over them, lightless and derelict. One wall had crumbled into concrete block and rubble, leaving a space of yawning darkness. It was surrounded with junk; the broken carcasses of boats, stripped car bodies, and less identifiable trash.

"I. . . told you"—Zachary's chattering teeth punctuated the words—"We'd be. . . okay."

"Thanks to you," Escher whispered. He looked up at the rising moon with numb surprise. It should be morning by now, should be next *week*. The shivering was easing off a little. He'd left yesterday back there, on the Ice Town barge. He was safe. He had *escaped*. A flicker of hope warmed him, and he sat up, wincing as his leg threatened to cramp again. "So how *do* you die?" he heard himself asking. Shit. "Never mind, I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Arms behind his head, Zachary stared up at the faint stars in the sky. "I jump off this cliff. I look down and there's only sand and a little sage underneath. No rocks, but in the dream, I figure it's far enough down that it doesn't matter if there's no rocks."

Jee—zus. "I'm sorry." Escher looked away from Zachary's calm face. Zachary believed it. He believed it as much as he'd believed that they wouldn't drown.

"It's okay. I dream about death all the time. It doesn't scare me anymore. What's going to happen is going to happen."

Hell, maybe the future *was* fixed. Escher stared out at the small galaxy of Ice Town's cooking fires and solar lanterns. "I'm signing up for another train," he said softly. "Tonight. It's the only place I'm going to be safe." Only Escher existed in the dark cold of 70°S. Eventually, yesterday would dwindle, freeze, dry up and blow away. He would never know whom he

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had loved and killed, never have to know why. "I can be myself out there," he said softly. "Escher." After awhile, Escher would be real.

Zachary was silent for a long moment. "Your friend Karen signs up again, too. I dreamed about her. You can stay with me," he said. "Until you leave. If you want to."

Loneliness blew through his words like an Antarctic wind. "Thanks," Escher said, understanding now how much Willy mattered. Because he was afraid of Zachary, of what he might dream. He hadn't been afraid before, but he *believed* now, and with that belief came fear. "Maybe Willy'll show up before I ship out," he said too heartily.

"Maybe." Zachary got to his feet, stuck out a hand. "It's not far. I'll help you."

It was far enough. Escher limped slowly after Zachary as they threaded the maze of piled junk that surrounded the derelict building beyond the ruined dock. This was the wasteland that surrounded the berg plant. Rusty oil drums lay like tumbled spools, leaking oily fluid that gleamed in the moonlight. They gave the drums a wide berth, emerged from a thicket of twisted and stripped cars onto a wide, empty street. Big halide lamps glowed to their right. *Greater Los Angeles Ice Processing Facility.* The neon sign gleamed ice-blue, ten feet high, at least. Salvation. He could sign up there in the morning—they had a twenty-four hour terminal open in the foyer. He could catch the *Western Star* on her way out of port, ride her down to Argentina, where the crews assembled. Escher had a past on the *Star*. He had a past in Ushuaia.

Zachary steadied him as Escher stumbled. "You okay?"

Yes, yes, he was okay. He'd escaped, left yesterday behind in Ice Town, would leave it forever in a few days. "It's just my leg," he said. "Cramps."

"Hang in there for another block. Willy and I fixed up this place in an old furniture store." He put an arm around Escher, strong for all his skinny build. "It's mostly squatters down here," he went on. "The buildings got really shaken up in one of the quakes, and I guess nobody wants to fix 'em up. The ice-plant people are always getting the cops to run us off. I bet Willy's back. He was probably just off dealing that last load we picked up. Most of the stuff was gone when I checked." His voice was too bright, and it had a raw edge to it.

"He'll be back." Escher tried to put certainty into his voice. "You're right, he's dealing stuff."

"Yeah," Zachary said quickly. "He knew I'd come back. He wouldn't have gone out without me."

They'd reached the wide boulevard that ran past the ice-processing complex. Islands in the center had turned into wastelands of cracked dirt, drifted with shoals of trash. It had been designed to carry at least four lanes of traffic. Big streetlights curved metal necks over the empty width of asphalt, dark and dead. In the old days, when gas had been affordable, the city had been full of private cars. The street was empty now, except for a big water tanker that had just pulled out of the complex.

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A tanker truck. Something nagged at him—a memory from the ice-train. Escher lost it as an engine roared behind them. He looked over his shoulder. A car had turned onto the street they were following, was accelerating toward the intersection. Its headlights were off, and he could hear music blaring. Private license plate, low-slung expensive design. Someone with money, out scoring drugs or sex, or just slumming. The driver wasn't slowing down, couldn't see the big tanker because of the cracked storefront that had buckled halfway into the street, although the idiot should have noticed the headlights by now. Stoned, probably. The trucker couldn't see the car and was accelerating fast—paid by the trip, the driver was hauling ass.

"Oh, jeeze," Zachary said in a soft, strange voice. "They're gonna burn."

Burn? Escher remembered Zachary's nightmare in the crew mess as speed and direction came together in his head. Shit, *yes*. He lunged into the street, waving, trying to catch the driver's eye. The fool was going to pull right out in front of the truck. The car's lights came on suddenly, blinding him, exploding in his head with brilliant vision; light. . . anguish. . . the cliffwall face of a truck bore down on him and he suffered a crushing moment of regret as he didn't jump. . . .

The car seemed to move toward him in slow motion, horn blaring. Frozen by light, Escher gasped as memory unrolled in his head, peeling backward through time. Those surprised eyes were on his face and the skinny body sagged in his arms again. *Not you? Not here!* Escher cried silently, but a part of him exulted as the blade went in, bursting through the frail resistance of skin and muscle, sliding over bone to touch the heart. . . . Then the blood rushed over his knuckles, and his eyes were full of tears, and he was shouting, crying, but it was too late, too late to stop it, undo it. Grief pierced like a blade, twisting like steel in his gut, and there was no way to stop it, not ever. . . .

Breaks screamed and the car rushed past him, swerving out into the intersection. The truck's airhorn blared as the car skidded into its path and metal crunched. The car ricocheted off the truck's fender, veered across the street and plowed into a lightpole. Time had speeded up to normal again. The truck was stopping, the driver swearing in Spanish out the window. Escher stood in the middle of the street, shaking. The car's driver fought the door open and got out, amazingly unhurt, followed by a woman.

"Escher?" Zachary's voice was ragged. "My *God*, Escher. What did you do?"

"I killed him. I didn't *mean* to," he mumbled. Only he had. No, no, that was yesterday. "I . . didn't do anything." Escher staggered as Zachary grabbed him, nails digging into his arms, face thrust close to Escher's.

"It *burned*." In the dim light of the moon, Zachary's eyes shone like an animal's. "The *car*. I saw it burn. I *dreamed* it! How they all died, how they burned, and I could hear it, hear the flames roaring, and the screaming. It has to happen that way! It *has* to."

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"So your dreams *don't* come true." He shook off Zachary's clutch, fighting the memory that wanted to overwhelm him. He had *let* that truck hit him two years ago, had decided to die in that split second of light, because, because. . . no, *no! He* hadn't done it, he was *Escher*, and Escher had never lived here. Escher had been born in a hospital bed and lived on the ice, mist-man, so fragile. . .

"It *can't* change. No one can stop it from happening! *No* one!" Zachary's eyes blazed with green fire. "You think you're so damn smart, huh? You want to know your name, smart guy? I dreamed about *you*, only your name's not Escher. Want me to tell you who you are? Do you?"

Stunned, confused, Escher backed away. His name—that would *do* it, let the flood in, drown him in yesterday. He believed in Zachary's dreams. A face shimmered in the shadows. Yesterday? Waiting for Escher to remember—waiting for Escher to die?

If Zachary said his name out loud. . . .

Escher turned and fled, stumbling down the street, staggering, running. He cut through an alley behind a boarded-up building, sobbing for breath. The lights were still on at the processing complex, although the city had finally gone curfew dark. Water could buy you anything. It could buy you life. Pipes tunneled like huge dark snakes through the dry earth and moonlight gleamed on the melting bergs out in the bay. Escher stumbled up the steps to the complex foyer.

The building was dark, locked up, although people would be working somewhere inside, monitoring the precious water as it was mixed with the maximum allowable amount of purified seawater and piped out the taps of the city's thirsty, or pumped inland to water the salt-tolerant crops. Ice, frozen water, could buy him his soul. A recruitment terminal had been built into the wall of the entryway. It was open. Escher shivered in the cool breeze from the bay, his heart slowing at last. Yesterday was fading. That bloodstained ghost had no place here, no reality. It would still be okay. He'd sign on, use his signup bonus to rent a room somewhere, until the *Star* sailed. He'd make out. He, *Escher*. He'd survive.

Welcome. The terminal screen brightened at his touch. *Please choose a category by touching the red box beside it*, a soft voice intoned.

He touched the box inside *Employment.application*, touched *ice crew*, and entered his ID number.

It was too early in the year for the trains to be heading down to 70°S, but he could hang out in Ushuaia. It was cheap, and Escher had a past in Ushuaia. He wouldn't come back to LA. He could sign on with a train bound for San-Diego/Tijuana, or San Francisco, or even Australia or Europe. Tanaka ran trains all over the world.

Application accepted. Please place your palm on the blue square to confirm contract.

Escher pressed his palm against the sky-blue square on the terminal screen.

Your contract has been filed and recorded. If you wish to terminate, substantial penalties will apply. Thank you.

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Someone cleared his throat behind Escher.

He turned slowly, heart contracting in his chest. The small man with the blotched face leaned against the entryway. "I came down here to jack your personnel file out of the terminal." He tossed a small, flat rectangle of gray plastic on his palm. "Nice timing, I'd say. Where is he?"

Escher slumped against the terminal, defeated, trapped finally, so close to escape. "Where is who?" he asked, and was amazed that his voice didn't shake.

"Odell. I got the word that you two were tight on the train, so I figured you'd lead me to him. And you did. He didn't drown in the damn bay, did he?" A frown flitted across the man's blotchy face. "That was a pretty dumb stunt, jumping in. Even for a two-bit water pirate like you."

Zachary. This man—Kyle; the name came to Escher so *easily*—had wanted Zachary all along. What *irony*. Escher swallowed a wild urge to laugh. He could have stood back, out there on the pier, and yesterday would have walked right past him. It would have taken Zachary instead. "Why?" he croaked. "What do you want him for?"

Kyle shrugged. "This guy held a lien on him, and he sold it to the boss. Turns out Tanaka slapped another one on Odell, and now it's doubled, 'cause the asshole jumped it. The boss sent me to collect him before Tanaka gets hold of him. Boss wants him bad." Kyle's eyes glittered. "The old scav who sold him said that this guy can tell the future," he said softly. "What a line, but the boss bought it."

That's what they wanted? Sickness clenched like a fist in Escher's guts. They thought Zachary was a fortune teller. Escher remembered Jamie's belief on the train. It was contagious, belief. Like a plague. "You fell for it too, huh?" He tried a laugh.

"It's a scam, huh?" Kyle's lips twitched, as if he wanted to spit. "I figured. Too bad for Odell."

Kyle's cold tone raised the hairs on the back of Escher's neck. "What was the old scav's name?" he asked softly. "Willy?"

"Could be." Kyle looked at him from the corners of his eyes. "Sounds about right. You know, if a guy *could* do that, tell the future, and all. It'd be like owning this place." He jerked his head at the processing complex. "If you knew, say, the number of the winning lottery ticket—you could maybe find out who bought it. You'd know when a city bust was coming down, when the water cops were gonna check the fences." He rubbed his hands together lightly, his eyes gleaming. "Yeah, it'd be worth a lot."

Willy had sold Zachary out, had convinced some shark boss to pay for a chance at that kind of talent. Nice guy, old Willy. But he wasn't afraid of the dreams, and that's all that mattered to Zachary.

"I'm offering a finder's fee." Kyle licked his lips, his eyes glistening with greed. "I'll catch up with him sooner or later, but if it's sooner and simple, it's worth a little cash to me."

Kyle wouldn't believe Zachary's explanation of his dreams. He'd think

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Zachary was holding out, and figure that he just needed a little persuading. Life was cheap here. Life was cheap everywhere in this damn Dry. Escher met the man's stare. He couldn't help Zachary, didn't know the language, didn't know the tone and the winks, and the little cues that would convince Kyle to lay off long enough for Zachary to disappear. He would shrug and Kyle would walk away. Too bad, Zachary. Maybe Kyle wouldn't find him.

Oh sure. Kyle would have Zachary by tomorrow night.

Escher closed his eyes briefly, remembering Zachary's arm across his chest as they struggled through the cold water. If they'd gone down, Zachary wouldn't have let go. It came to him suddenly—why Zachary had been so upset when the car didn't crash. He understood, and that understanding left him colder than Kyle's threats. He was safe here, but it was illusion, that safety. Escher opened his eyes, bathed in the bright, shadowless glow of the facility lights. He, Escher, was a shadow man. He only existed here in the fragile bubble of the ice trains. He was no more real than the tiny figures on that endless stair. Escher let his breath out in a long slow sigh. He could spend his whole life on that stairway, running away from yesterday, thinking that he was getting somewhere, only to turn the corner and find out that he was right back where he started from.

He'd lived here. The woman in the drink shack had recognized him, and the man she had recognized would know the right words. The man she had recognized had stood in front of a truck, two years ago.

To hell with it. He was tired of the damn stairs. A dizzy rush of fear and regret shook him—like that moment when he had stood still in the glare of the truck's headlights.

"We're even, Zachary," Escher murmured softly. He shrugged, grinned a shark grin at Kyle, and said, "Okay, let's talk."

It was almost dawn by the time Escher made his way back along the street where he'd left Zachary. He and Kyle had haggled for awhile, had finally settled on four hundred dollars in untraceable, blackmarket cash to be paid over when Escher delivered Zachary. They had set it up for the afternoon, in the drowned tower where he'd met Zachary. Four hundred dollars was a decent price for a man's life, around here. Kyle had done the deal, because Escher had said all the right things, in the right tone, with the right body language.

He didn't feel any different. *You're the same man*, Karen had said, and she had been wrong. Or had she? Had he been running from himself, all this time? Escher glanced warily over his shoulder, but the street behind him was empty. He remembered being Escher, making love to Karen, freezing his ass, hating Jamie's needling. Who am I? he asked himself, and still wasn't quite sure. He turned a corner and ducked back into the entrance of an abandoned storefront, listening for footsteps. Kyle had tried to follow, to save himself four hundred bucks, but Escher had the

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skills to shake him, now. Silence, except for the small night sounds of insects and rats.

Still no sign of Kyle. Escher started up the street, looking for the furniture store Zachary had mentioned. Behind him, moonlight blazed a gleaming path across the dark bay, and red warning beacons winked along the perimeter fence where he'd nearly drowned. He felt a little schizophrenic; he knew how to cut through a perimeter fence. . . and he didn't. Shark and tourist were both trying to look through his eyes, and the point of view got a little fuzzy at times. So maybe Escher was still here.

The eastern sky was turning gray by the time he found the store. The big windows had been covered with broken sheets of plastic siding torn from some house. They had been bright turquoise once, had faded to a pale greenish-blue in the sun. No entry here. Escher rounded the corner, found a heavy wooden door standing ajar. He slipped inside, found himself in a dark hallway. Doors opened on either side. Escher peered into them, one after the other. Empty, empty, except for a broken desk and a tipped-over filing cabinet, empty. Aha.

A single solar lantern hung from the dusty acoustic tiles of the ceiling. Crude shelves had been nailed to the wall. They held food, cooking utensils, odds and ends, and books. Dirty dishes cluttered a battered table, beside a plastic tub half full of scummy water. Three empty water jugs stood beside the tub. A rumpled bed occupied one wall, and a mattress on the floor took up the other end of the room.

Zachary knelt in front of it, shoving a water-jug into a pack. Packing for a trip into the Dry? He looked up and scowled. "Beat it," he growled. "Get out of here, *'Cuda*. Run, or I'll tell you more."

"That's the name Kyle knew." Escher leaned against the doorframe. "That's not my real name. That's not who I was hiding from." He looked down at Zachary, at the cornered hunch of his body. "I didn't understand, out there in the street, but I do now," he said softly. "I made it your *responsibility*, didn't I? All those people you dream about. If you can't change the future, then you can't blame yourself for not warning them somehow, for not saving them. But I proved that you *could* have saved them."

"Go to hell," Zachary breathed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that to you."

"I don't forget everything." Zachary stared up at him, his eyes as bleak as the Dryland hills. "I remember my father some. I remember him laughing, cutting branches off the vat bushes with his machete. I remember how he'd tell me stories, me sitting on his lap in the dark. It was just us, or at least, I don't remember anyone else." He looked down at the crumpled pack in his hands. "The machete was so sharp, it could cut right through a branch as big around as your thumb. It bounced off something one day, and cut his leg. The blood wouldn't stop coming. Only I didn't *see* that part. I dreamed it. When I found him, the blood had soaked into the dust. It was all dark and dry, and ants were crawling

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into his mouth. I couldn't lift him. He was too heavy." Zachary threw the pack aside, his eyes full of razor-edged pain. "I didn't tell him about the dream. Or maybe I did and he didn't listen, but it didn't matter, don't you see, because it *would* have happened anyway. It wasn't *my* fault, I couldn't have stopped it. Only. . . that's not true, is it?" He buried his face in his hands and groaned.

"Sometimes, people aren't going to listen." Escher put a hand on his shoulder. Maybe that's what had brought them together on the train. They had both been hiding from the face of death. "We herded goats along the edge of the Dry," Escher said slowly. "Doug, and I, always together. The older I got, the more I hated it. You could see how the land was dying, how we were killing it faster with the goats. It seemed so pointless. My dad couldn't see it, or maybe he just didn't want to." Escher heard the bitterness in his voice, swallowed. "So we. . . fought a lot. I only hung on as long as I did because of Doug." His voice wanted to shake and he drew a quick, hard breath. "When I finally took off, he wouldn't come with me. I'd never questioned it—that we'd both take off. In the end. . . Doug sided with my dad. He stayed."

So Escher had left and had finally ended up here, telling himself that Ice Town was alive, a place where you could make yourself a future. Only there wasn't really any more future here than in the Dry. Doug had got it right, after all. Ice Town was just another stairway, another circle to nowhere. "I was a water pirate," he said. "And a shark. I got into this fight one day." He'd gotten cut—not bad, but enough to scare him a little and make him crazy mad. "This guy came at me," Escher said softly. "Out of the crowd. I didn't really look at *him*. I thought he had a knife, and I didn't even see who it *was* until it was too late." He looked away. "It was Doug. God knows how he ended up in Ice Town. I guess he was trying to help me." He'd looked so surprised when the blade had gone in, and the he'd looked puzzled, and sad, and then he'd died. He'd never said a word. Nothing. "He made me see it," Escher said softly. "What I was, what I'd let myself become. And for a moment. . . I was glad I'd killed him." Escher closed his hand slowly, remembering the weight of the knife in his hand, that moment of exultation. Because Doug had betrayed him. Doug had let him go and it hadn't been any damn better in Ice Town. If he hadn't succumbed to that moment of hatred. . . could he have stopped the blade in time? Escher let his breath out in a slow sigh. Maybe not, but he'd never know. "Where are you going?" He nudged the pack with his toe. "Out to look for Willy?"

"Willy's not coming back." Zachary's face twitched. "I was just going into the Dry."

To find that cliff? Because he couldn't live with the load of deaths Escher had just dumped onto his shoulders? He could make sure *that* dream came true, at least. "Tell me your dream about Karen," he said harshly.

"Karen?" Zachary blinked. "Oh her, from the train." He looked away,

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lips tightening. "She falls off this cliff of ice in the dark. It's a long way down, and she lands on the deck of a boat. I think she dies."

So she'd sign up again after all. The fields wouldn't make it. "There'll be another time, like the car." Escher spoke slowly, deliberately, each word like the stab of a knife. "If you're dead, it's going to happen anyway. If you're alive, maybe it *won't*. Once in awhile, maybe we can change something. Mostly we probably can't." Escher looked around. "You got another pack I can use?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We're leaving right now. We're going up to the Willamette Valley. To this town called Ryder." Folks would know where Karen and Randy lived. "I have a wedding present for Karen." He still had a little money left after paying the fine for breaking his new contract. Not much, but maybe enough. She could put it aside, keep it safe until the day when she needed to sign up on another ice-train. Then she could use it. She believed in Zachary's dreams, so she'd listen to him. "Maybe she won't die on the deck of a boat," he said. "Maybe we can buy her a different future." A life for a death? It wouldn't be enough, but maybe it would help a little.

"We?" Zachary's face twisted. "I scare you, like I scare everyone," he said harshly. "And I'll dream about you. A *lot*, because you're around. That's the way it works."

"You scared me for awhile," Escher said softly. "Not any more. Tell me one thing—the man you knew on the ice-train, and the one you dreamed about. . . are they the same man?"

"They're *you*." Zachary looked puzzled. "Who else?"

Who else, indeed?

Zachary got up suddenly, fumbled a book from beneath a pile of rags. Pushing aside a clutter of dishes and junk, he spread it open on the table. "Willy didn't trade this. You want it?"

The waterstained page showed a copy of the print he'd lost with his carryall. The tiny figures plodded patiently on their endless stairway. Maybe it was only endless if you thought you were going somewhere; up or down. Maybe—if you *knew* that it was a circle, if you let your feet carry you back to where you started, and recognized that spot for what it was—maybe you'd find a way off. Maybe the only other way off was a truck, or a cliff out in the Dry.

"I think I'll leave it here." He touched the smooth paper with one finger. "I don't think it applies anymore."

"You sure about this?" Zachary didn't quite meet his eyes. "Us together, I mean. Are you really sure?"

Hope in those words, desperate and desolate. "You dream tomorrow, and I'll remember yesterday for both of us. We'll take it from there." Escher closed the book. "Yeah, I'm sure about us, and my name's Shane. My Dad had this thing for Old West heroes." He smiled faintly. "Find me a pack and let's get out of here, okay?"

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Zachary returned his smile. It didn't banish the wary shadows in his eyes, but it was a smile, anyway.

"I got one," he said. "I'll go get it."

Shane, 'Cuda, Escher, Shane. One man, many names. You could spend your life running away from yourself. Time to get off the damn stairway. "Hurry up," Shane said, and found a place for the book, up high on an empty shelf. ●

FROM: A CHILD'S GARDEN OF GRAMMAR

ODIOUS COMPARISONS

I have been good, but you've been better;
The proof is on your letter sweater.
I'm happy to have been your guest,
But still I wonder: who is best?

You can be bad, but I am worse:
I drink, I smoke, I fight, I curse.
But look at him, whom you loved first,
Who's now so rich, and quite the worst.

ATTRACTIVE OPPOSITES

You're beautiful, while I am plain.
I love you quite against my grain.
You're shy, I'm bold; you're young, I'm old;
You're disciplined, I'm uncontrolled.
You're cold, I'm hot; I seek, you're sought;
You're what I lack, I'm what you've got.
You're everything that I am not.

—Tom Disch

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Alternate April

Triumph
By Ben Bova
Tor, $18.95

I've noted, perhaps to excess recently, that SF concepts have become so complex that for some examples it's taken the amount of space I'd usually devote to a whole review simply to give some idea of the background. This is said not as a value judgment, but as of some interest in the matter of the evolution of science fiction (and to excuse what might seem periodic long-windedness on my part).

Now this also applies to that curious and (until recently) rare SF subgenre, the alternate world. We are up to our glasses in alternate everythings—Americas, Kennedys, and even (rumor hath it) Elvis Presleys. (Here's the perfect example of a fairly esoteric concept, the origins of which could probably be pinpointed with some accuracy in the American pulps. It's taken this long to be popularly accepted and understood well enough to make it a frequently used idea.)

Of course, even the simplest "what if" leads to countless ramifications (i.e., what if the South had won the Civil War?). But now the "what ifs" are getting subtler and more complex. A perfect example is Ben Bova's *Triumph*. Here the last days (the month of April 1945, to be exact) of World War II in Europe are given some twists; it's left to the reader to spot them and to divine what their results will be (though Bova gives a few clues to the latter).

Basically, the book devotes alternating chapters to the high commands of the combatants: Roosevelt and Dulles, Churchill and Eden, Hitler and Göring, Stalin and various Russian generals, who are advancing on Berlin. (In Yalta, it has been agreed that the Russians can take Berlin, and Eisenhower is holding to this agreement, though the English and Americans are getting close from the west). A few chapters are devoted to WWII grunts, who eventually turn out to be those who take Hitler's bunker (a clue right there). Everything is according to the (history) book to start off with, but then certain things begin to tease. Roosevelt quit smoking two years earlier—that famous cigarette holder empty for the final two years of the war? one thinks frantically. (I was around then, but barely, and smoking was not the burning issue it is now.) A small batch of plutonium is sent to England from the Manhattan Project. Huh? The Brits didn't even know what plutonium *was!*

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But somebody did, and those small wrinkles in history mushroom. Just to give away one more tantalizing *if*, Stalin is murdered with the help of his private secretary, one Grigori Gagarin—last name familiar? Grigori has a younger brother named Yuri.

Bova provides a handy "Afterword" that gives the realities of "our" April 1945. As noted above, however, he leaves the future that stretches from this alternate April to the reader's imagination.

Family Values

Deep Freeze
Zack Hughes
DAW, $4.99 (paper)

Last month I commented on the body count of a certain novel, comparing it favorably (?) to that of *Hamlet*. But Zack Hughes in *Deep Freeze* manages to top 'em all—at the end of this novel only one major character is left alive. And I'm going to try and walk a tightrope not to reveal which, though it becomes pretty obvious about midway through.

The Webster family is quite a crew. Fran and Dan are a well preserved middle-aged couple, even for the six-score year life expectancy of the future in which they live. Their children, with one exception, have had spectacular careers: David has enriched himself through interstellar trading; Sheba is considered one of the most beautiful women in the United Planets and has developed an acting talent to match to become a super holostar; Joshua is a shining light of the Department of Exploration and Alien Search (i.e., the Space Patrol); Sarah has married one of the most powerful men in the U.P. Only David's twin, Ruth, has avoided the limelight by being a dedicated teacher.

Well, Mama and Papa (as they call each other) go off on a post-retirement voyage in their own ship. Thanks to a recent innovation, huge jumps ("blinks") are possible. The older Websters decide to boldly go where etc., leaving a sporadic trail of electronic breadcrumbs behind them. They come upon the explorer's find of a lifetime—a star with planets, one within the life zone. Curiously, it is frozen over when it should not be, and there are substantial deposits of metals.

Without giving away what happens to whom, I can reveal that all the children suddenly feel curious subliminal urges to find their parents. Given their status, they have top of the line ships at their disposal. David takes Ruth. Sheba stows away on Joshua's ship, on which is also his fiancée, a fellow officer. Sarah follows with her husband and Sheba's current bedmate. It is not giving away too much to say that there is a "Watcher" on the planet with lethal tendencies. The problem is that in a fairly simplistic story like this, it is curiously unsatisfying for the reader to have almost all the major sympathetic characters done away with, no matter how intriguingly.

Cootie Music

Labyrinth of Night
By Allen Steele
Ace, $4.99 (paper)

As I've mentioned before, I'm usually a sucker for the alien arti-

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fact subgenre of SF. Show me some alien stuff, from the size of a pebble to a whole city, left over on some Godforsaken world, and I'm know I'm halfway to a good story already.

In Allen Steele's *Labyrinth of Night*, the Godforsaken world is Mars, and the artifact is indeed a city—sort of. There is a monumental carving of an anthropoid face (first photographed in 1976) apparently to arouse the curiosity of us anthropoid types, four pyramids arranged in a square, and a single larger pyramid. These three artifacts are arranged to comprise two adjacent sides of a right angle, apparently to convince any finders that the grouping is artificial.

The action takes place about forty years from now, and is not exactly unfamiliar. We have the international group of dedicated apolitical scientists, first caught up in hostilities revived between Russia and the U.S. over the alien site because of possible scientific advances to be found there. That solved, a creepy U.S. right-wing military megalomaniac manages to get himself installed as observer on site, and has to be bested. The narrative shuttles between the advances made in discovering the secret(s) of the site (definitely built by aliens to our system and dubbed the Cooties—urgh—by a frolicsome scientist) and, when we get too near a solution to the enigma(s), the various machinations and intrigues. It's familiar ground but well done, and the ultimate purpose of it all might take you by surprise.

But I must pick one nit—and rather a major nit, if that's not a contradiction in terms. Steele serves us up a future that is convincing enough technologically, but really lacking in other details that might convince us that we're in the future—a *near* future, admittedly, but thinking forty years back there are a lot of differences, and one might expect the same going in the other direction. But he gives us almost nothing new in what might be called the cultural (in the general sense) sphere. Instead, we get references to Groucho Marx and a bulkhead is "plastered with . . . Playboy pinups." One character (Japanese) is a fan of old rock and roll, another (Russian) of old Western movies, so we get references to John Wayne and Jerry Lee Lewis, but apparently nobody has written music or made films since, or if so, the characters have no knowledge or interest in them.

It's in the music department that this is most painfully obvious. Steele is not alone in this. I have been struck for years by the number of writers who can extrapolate all sorts of interesting facts about the future, but to whom it never seems to occur that music will not still consist of groups with electronic instruments, roadies, etc. Again I can but suggest looking back to the musical scene of fifty years ago, one hundred years ago, etc., to see that music does change, and radically. Here part of the aliens' bag of tricks was to leave a series of I.Q. tests, one of which consisted of some musical tones. It reminds one of the scientists of the improvisations of a contemporary pop musician, a guitarist-singer, who is tracked down at a classic Woodstock-type festival (roadies,

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druggies, and all) and is suborned to go to Mars and do a sort of "Dueling Banjos" with the Cootie recording/booby trap/test. During it we get Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, and the "Twilight Zone" theme, but nothing contemporary with the story. The author convinced me he knew a lot about current pop music; I wish he'd spent more time creating a convincing future.

Elves, Life and Dark

The Clan of the Warlord
by Elizabeth H. Boyer
Del Rey, $4.99 (paper)

Elizabeth H. Boyer's *Clan of the Warlord* has a problem to begin with in its title. From it, one might expect a sort of fantasy Sino-Japanese-Mongol Far East, with lots of pseudo-Samurai dashing about and bashing each other with swords and sorceries. Nope. There is a warlord on the premises, but he's a secondary character without that many lines, so I can't imagine why he got into the title.

The clans, it seems, are those of elves—this world is populated by singularly unelven elves, with rather loosely defined powers and coming in two major varieties, the *Dokkalfar* (dark elves) and the *Ljosalfar* (light elves) who just don't hit it off. This is peculiar because there's some talk about "dayfarers" and "nightfarers," which would imply a neat non-aggressive division, but everybody in the book seems to be out at all hours.

In any case, these two are subdivided into various clans, and the story is set against a realm which has been conquered by the Dokkalfar Krypplingur, who have done away with the ruling Ljosalfar Skylding clan. But a foundling child is brought to an elderly magician and she is certainly one of the Skyldings. (Clues are that her name is Skyla, and that she burps feathers and creates raw gemstones in her tiny wee hands.) Thirteen years later the warlord (*there* he is) of the conquering clan decides that the old wizard is the only one who can cure his cursed wound, and the household (which includes a most ill-natured dwarf) moves to the big city. This city predates everybody and is full of all sorts of nasty things.

There Skyla finds a pack of wild boys who are also mislaid Skyldings led by Jafnar, an adolescent just her age. Turns out that they can turn into snow lynxes, among other things, but this power is only brought about by a sort of plum pudding that Skyla's addicted to. And is she or isn't she responsible for all the Dokkalfar deaths (hearts ripped out) in her lynx form? (One of her less endearing traits has been to kill small birds and animals to see if she can restore them to life.)

There's also a sorceress who skulks about uttering dire warnings, and an obviously untrustworthy young magician out to find the Skyldings' treasure who unexpectedly turns out to be the hero (you were betting on Jafnar) because almost everybody else is dead by the end of the novel. Is this becoming a trend?

As you can see, Boyer has some original ingredients going here, and some real atmosphere in her ancient city, but the elements are, to say the least, thrown together rather capriciously.

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Murder & Mars

Mars Prime
By William C. Dietz
Roc, $4.99 (paper)

William C. Dietz, in an afterword to his latest novel, *Mars Prime*, says that "every science fiction writer worth his or her salt must eventually write a Mars novel." This somewhat sweeping statement gives pause as one envisions what would happen if certain current writers tackled (as it were) Mars. On the other hand, I'm glad that Dietz, at least, did *his* Mars novel.

He has chosen the earliest attempts at Martian settlement, which in this case is in what might be called a dome, though it's about as much of a dome as your average starfaring ship is a sphere. In any case, it's a sealed environment, to and into which, along with two thousand plus new colonists, come the intrepid man-and-wife news-gathering team of Kim and Rex Corvan. (Rex has a miniature camcorder where his right eye should be). Mars Prime has been barely made into a livable environment by eight hundred workers already there; they are months behind schedule.

Kim and Rex have come along as reporters on this great endeavor; Rex immediately runs into trouble aboard ship since he finds he is subject to censorship. The powers that be, on ship and presumably on Mars, want propaganda, not news. The immediate cause of the dispute is certainly a sensitive one—there has been a murder aboard the *Outward Bound* just before she Marsward bounds. There's another killing while presumably all the humans aboard are in cold storage. Kim has smuggled aboard a most sophisticated AI named Martin. (Apparently s/he/it was the center of an earlier adventure of the Corvans which slipped by me. Not to worry—Dietz is one of those writers who actually believes in exposition and explanation.)

So through the end of the voyage, the introduction to Mars Prime (which is in bad shape, physically and in morale), several more murders (of which the MO suggests *two* murderers), and the appearance of a fake messiah which results in a revolution, we follow our intrepid news team plus the engaging Martin (who is one of those really likable computers). And Martin has suborned various other AIs (now redundant) from the ship, so it's an unlikely crew working against the various negative forces (including the "suits" —the administrators). And I won't even mention the crashed alien vessel that's found. Here's another novel that's plain old good fun.

Shoptalk

Anthologies, etc. . . . An anthology that most inhabitants of the U.S. simply won't believe is *Ark of Ice,* edited by Lesley Cloyce. The title refers to Canada, the writers are all Canadian or residents thereof (Spider Robinson, Margaret Atwood, et al.), and the stories (twenty-two of them) are primarily concerned with the future of Canada. To most folk in the States, Canada hardly has a present, much less a future, but one just might find some surprises here —and certainly a change of background (though Toronto has cropped up more and more lately

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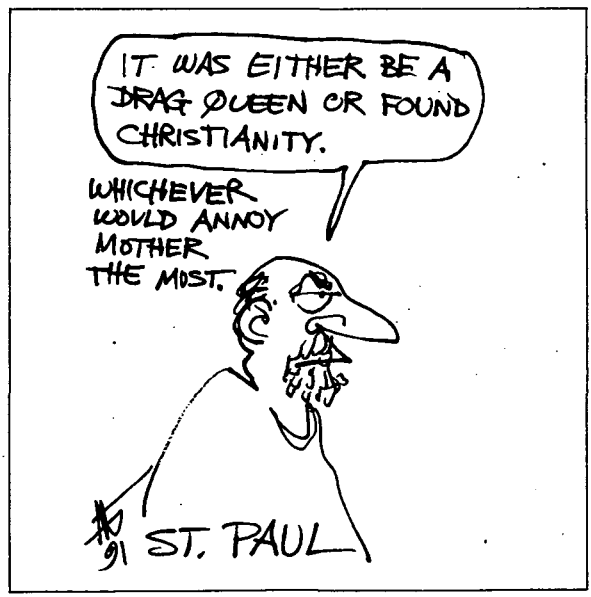
in fantasy particularly). (For information contact Pottersfield Press, Lawrencetown Beach, RR 2, Porters Lake, Nova Scotia B0J 2S0, Canada, $14.95 Canadian, paper.)

Peripheralia . . . Devoted fans of Ursula K. LeGuin will want to know that she has written a book for children called *Fish Soup*. It's charming, as are the illustrations by Patrick Wynne (the leading lady bears a definite resemblance to the author as pictured by Wynne) (Atheneum, $13.95, paper).

Sequels, prequels, series, and whatnot. . . . Well, finally. David Gerrold's series, "The War Against the Chtorr," was theatening to turn into a Hundred Years' War; the first volume was published in 1983. Here, however, is a series in which every volume is a satisfying segment, and an ongoing supersuspenseful man-against-the-alien-invaders saga as well. Volume four, *A Season For Slaughter*, is now with us (Bantam, $5.99, paper). . . . Book four of Robert Jordan's epic fantasy, "The Wheel of Time," has appeared. It's *The Shadow Rising* (Tor, $24.95—you can get it in leather for $200). . . . And then there's *The Call of Earth*, volume two of Orson Scott Card's series "Homecoming," which started out so neatly with *The Memory of Earth* (Tor, $21.95).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Deus X* by Norman Spinrad (Bantam, $3.50, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, **1393 rue la Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada.** ●



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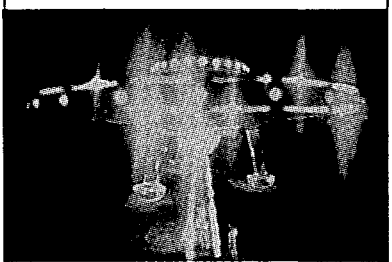

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The April schedule is packed, anchored by the traditional Easter-weekend con(vention)s. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. When phoning, give your name and reason for calling right off. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre.

APRIL 1993

1-4—**Magnum Opus Con**. For info, write: Box 6585, Athens GA 30604. Or phone: **(706) 549-1533** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect) or fax (706) 549-8819. Con will be held in: Greenville SC (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hyatt. Guests will include: Ben Bova, C.J. Cherryh, R. Asprin, M. Rawn.

2-4—**CoastCon. (601) 864-6064.** Holiday Inn Express, Biloxi MS. T. Zahn, L. Watt-Evans, A. Offutt.

2-4—**Silvercon. (702) 227-9335.** Aladdin Hotel, Las Vegas NV. P. Anderson, J. Ecklar, W. Rotsler.

8-11—**FutureFest. (800) 878-5317.** Downtown Hyatt, Houston TX. Geo. A. Effinger, Sidney Williams.

8-12—**Australian National Con.** Ascot Inn Belmont, Perth Australia. Terry Pratchett, Craig Hilton.

8-12—**Euro & UK Nat'l. Con. Internet: timill@cix.compulink.co.uk.** St. Helier Hotel, Jersey, UK.

9-11—**BaltiCon. (410) 563-2737** Hunt Valley Marriott north of Baltimore MD. Allen Steele, D. Maitz.

9-11—**MiniCon. (612) 338-4728 or 824-5559.** Radisson South, Minneapolis MN. S. Allison, Don Fitch.

9-11—**TechniCon. (703) 552-0572.** Donaldson Brown Center, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg VA. S. Quirk.

16-18—**PhoenixCon, Box 1513, Smyrna GA 30081. (404) 578-8461.** Atlanta GA. Bujold, Deitz, Steele.

16-18—**Miscon, Box 9363, Missoula MT 59807. (406) 728-9423.** Brin, Hanson-Roberts, Dunn, Apodaca.

16-18—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6768.** Benford, Ed Bryant, C.S. Gardner.

16-18—**ConTroll, Box 740969, Houston TX 77274.** Airport Hilton, Houston TX. Niven, Barnes, Dugas.

23-25—**MarCon, Box 211101, Columbus OH 43211. (614) 475-0158 or 268-6322.** At Ohio Center Hyatt.

23-25—**Fantasy Arts Con, Box 8602, Boise ID 83701. (208) 832-4935.** Back after a year's absence.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2-6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** WorldCon in SF.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 944-1998 (fax).** WorldCon. C$95/US(85.

JULY 1995

13-16—**DragonCon, Box 47696, Atlanta GA 30362. (404) 925-2813.** North American SF Con (NASFiC).

AUGUST 1995

24-28—**Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003.** Glasgow UK. World SF Con. US$65.

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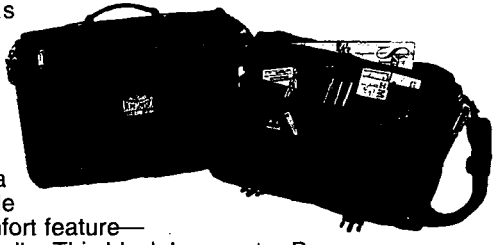

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